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BONNY JEAN,

AND

A SEVERE THREAT.

BY

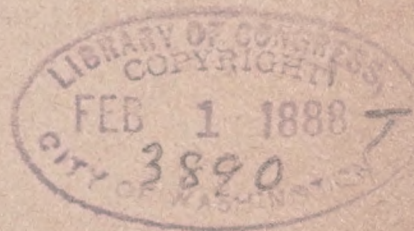
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MRS. E. BURKE COLLINS,

Author of "Married for Gold," "The Creole's Crime," etc.

Mrs. Emma Augusta (Brown) Sharkey

—
(DOUBLE NUMBER.)
—

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BONNY JEAN.

CHAPTER I.

SWORN TO THE DEAD.

The southern sun was slowly dying in the sky, passing away in royal state, down a pathway paved with gold, and with banners of Tyrian purple, and rose, and amber all about. It shone in a mist of wondrous glory over the dense green pine woods, laving the river's breast with molten gold; it made its way through the thickest of forest trees upon the banks of the swift flowing Tangipahoa, and strayed in through the open door of a log-cabin, resting with caressing touch upon the silvery hair and white, worn features of the old man who lay upon his rude bed silent and alone.

The lamp of life was burning low, and after long years of toil and hardship and strange adventure, old David Conway lay dying, and he knew that ere another sun should rise he would be gone. His had indeed been a rough and toilsome existence, hewing a living out of the sturdy oaks and pines which grew so thickly in that portion of the South at the period upon which my story opens; and many a shining dollar had he made with his industrious hands. But all that was over. He had struck his last blow; the ax would never again be lifted by the strong hands, frail and weak now as a child's; and soon the place that knew him would know him no more.

Everything was very still within the cabin; no sound broke the silence, only the swift flow of the river as it swept by, and

the slow, labored breathing of the dying man. All at once a stray sunbeam touched his white face, and his eyes flew open.

"Philip," he called, softly, "Philip Randall, are you there?"

A young man who had been standing outside the open door, his eyes turned eagerly upon the distant road, which wound its way, like a serpent, in and out among the pines, started as the faint voice called his name, and hurriedly entered the cabin.

"Philip!"—the old man's voice was very feeble—"have they come?"

Philip's handsome face grew graver.

"No, sir," he returned, reluctantly, "not yet."

His tone was gentle and refined, his words well chosen. Despite his rough surroundings, you could see at a glance that Philip Randall was a gentleman.

"They have been unavoidably delayed, I am sure," he continued, bending over the old man as he spoke. "The roads are very bad since the late rains, you know, and—and—Mrs. Conway is not strong. They will surely come soon. So you think, Conway, that you will—that you will——" he hesitated.

"That I'll last until they come, Randall?" the old man interrupted. "Don't be afraid to speak out, Phil. It's *death* that's on me—I know all about it! Wal, wal, I'm ready and glad to go; I'm but a worn-out, useless hulk, and I long to get into harbor. But—I *can't* die until my wife comes home—my wife and bonny, bonny Jean."

He sighed heavily, his breath came more slowly and with greater effort now.

"Where's Black?" he asked, abruptly.

"I don't know, sir. Wait, I will go and see."

He left the cabin with hurried step, his frank face sad and grave in the fading sunlight, and hastened to the group of cabins a little removed, which marked the camp of the timbermen. Hardly was he out of sight when there appeared at the door of the cabin the figure of a man—tall, angular, ill-favored. His face was very pale, and his hair and eyes jet black;

there was an uneasy, restless glitter in the latter as he hurried inside the cabin and glanced around cautiously.

"You wanted to see me, Conway?" he whispered, nervously.

"You wished to have that little matter settled, did you not?"

The old man turned his head slowly on the pillow, and glanced at the new-comer.

"Ah, Black!" he faltered, "you're there, are you? Wal, bring the paper—quick, while I've got strength left to sign it. You're a good sort o' a chap, Black."

The man drew slowly near the bedside with a cat-like tread, a folded paper in his hand. His eyes shone with a fierce, greedy glare, and he trembled with repressed excitement. There were pen and ink on a rude shelf near. He dipped the pen into the ink and placed it in Conway's trembling hand—passing his arm around the old man's shoulders, and supporting him as he did so. The sound of approaching footsteps fell on his ears, and made him start guiltily.

"*Sign!*" he cried, hurriedly, indicating the spot with his forefinger.

Slowly and laboriously the old man traced the letters with the trembling hand that would soon be cold in death; slowly and tremulously—but at last the name stood there, plain and staring—"David Conway!" Then he fell back on the pillow panting and exhausted.

"The witnesses!" he gasped, feebly—"call some one to witness."

Just outside the cabin, two men—rough, illiterate fellows—were loitering. Black beckoned them to enter.

"Here, Burns—Norris," he said, in his soft, sleek voice, his glittering black eyes studying their bearded faces attentively. "Mr. Conway has been arranging his worldly affairs, and we need witnesses to the document. Sign your names, if you please, here," pointing to the proper place.

One after the other the two men scrawled their signatures, and then Black folded the document and thrust it into his

pocket. Scarcely had he disappeared when Philip entered hurriedly.

“They are coming, Mr. Conway,” he cried, excitedly. “I hear that they crossed the ferry just before sunset, and they may be expected any moment. Are you feeling any easier, sir?”

He sat down by the rude bedside, and took the cold hand in his own.

“Easy, did you say, Philip? No, I sha’n’t never be any better in this world, but—there’s another country, you know, my boy. I’ll drop anchor there afore many hours. But, Phil, since I am goin’ to peg out sure enough, I want to tell you somethin’; never told no other man—no other livin’ critter, since I had the secret to tell. There ain’t nobody eavesdrop-pin’, is there, Phil? No? Wal, listen to what I’m goin’ to say.”

The young man bent his head over the emaciated figure, still clasping the wrinkled hand in his own.

“There’s a paper,” continued the dying man, feebly. “Gabriel Black’s got it. It’s all right, Philip—all right. You’ll do what the paper says?”

“I’ll do whatever you desire, Mr. Conway,” he returned, earnestly.

“But,” faltered the broken voice, while the dim eyes searched the handsome, open face before him, “I haven’t told you the secret yet, you know, Phil, and—it’s gettin’ dark and cold in here. The secret, you see, wasn’t in that paper that Black’s got; it’s a secret o’ my own, and nobody don’t know nothin’ about it—remember that! Philip, you’ve heered tell o’ La Fitte, the pirate?”

Philip Randall’s face wore a look of surprise.

“Certainly, sir. “Who has not?”

“Wal, my father, old John Conway, once done La Fitte a good turn. He—the pirate, I mean—I’m very cold, Phil—he come mighty near bein’ killed by a band o’ Indians. They’d just got a hold o’ the brave feller—for he was brave and bold,

though a bad man, I 'spose—and jest as he was expectin' to pass in his checks my father happened along. Old Conway was a crack shot in them days, Phil, and afore you could say Jack Robinson, two o' them redskins bit the dust. I reckon the balance o' them got well skeered—maybe they thought there was more like John Conway a comin'—but anyhow they all turned quick and jest run away—beat by one single man. Ha ! ha ! Pretty good, wasn't it ? Wal, La Fitte was mighty grateful, and he told my father that he'd never forgit him. And he didn't Phil, though nobody but me on airth knows the truth o' the matter. You've heered the old story, how La Fitte had plenty o' treasure buried in different parts o' the country around Louisiana ? Wal, the fust thing my father knowed the pirate died, and left him a big pile, mostly gold, and he hid it safe away in the ground ; for, you see, the only bank that La Fitte knowed was a sand bank. And Phil, he buried that there treasure at a certain point on the Tanghipahoa river. But my father never dared to touch it—never made an effort to dig up the treasure. Phil—he was afeered. So he left it there, and when he died, six months ago—nigh onto a hundred years old, my boy—he told me all about it, and left it to me. But I've never had the strength to sarch for it, and now I'm struck down, and there it lays. If I had a son *I'd* tell him all about it, and leave it to him as a legacy. But Jean's all I've got, and she, poor child, must have that gold, Philip—it's her airthly all. Will you see arter it, my boy ? You know I trust you afore anybody in the wide world."

Philip pressed the wrinkled hand which he held.

"I will do the best I can," he replied, "for—I love Jean—will you leave her in my care, Mr. Conway ?"

"Willin'—ay ! and glad to do it. Thank God ! my gal will be well cared for. And you'll be good to the mother, Philip ?"

"As though she were my own," he responded, fervently.

"Wal, now, my boy, I'm agoin' to tell you. Wait a minute ; see fust ain't there somebody listenin', Phil. 'Pears like I hear

the 'sound o' heavy breathin'—look, boy! Be sure, for I'm goin' to tell you where to find this buried treasure. It's a brave lot, Philip, and maybe you'll think my mind's a wanderin' when I tell you all. It is—bend your head and listen—closer! that's right—it is a hull chist o' gold and jewels."

"Mr. Conway!"

"Philip—I'm a dyin'. Do you think that old Conway, who's always led a upright, honest life, on the square, would tell you a base *lie* on his death-bed? I repeat it, Philip Randall, it's a chist—an iron-bound chist—full o' gold and shinin' jewels—and it's buried away under ground. Listen. On the banks o' the Tangipahoa, Philip, a mile below Lee's Landin', near the lake swamp, you'll find, jist about high water mark, five gum trees growin' in a circle. One has a big cross cut into its bark; dig down under that tree, Phil, and there you'll find it. It's for my child, and my curse—the curse of the dyin'—rest upon whoever touches it that hain't got no right to do it. It belongs to Jean, and Jean's husband, Philip."

The old man's voice was very faint now, and his eyes were glazing rapidly.

"You'll promise to do as I ask you?"

The young man bowed his head.

"I promise," he answered, solemnly.

"God bless you!"

For a time a heavy silence brooded over all things. Then suddenly Philip Randall sprang to his feet.

"Mrs. Conway!" he cried aloud. "They have come—your wife—and Jean."

But the dull eyes saw not, the deaf ears scarce comprehended, as in through the open door-way two women, all travel-stained and splashed with mud and water, rushed wildly, and fell upon their knees beside the bed. Old David could no longer see them, but his lips moved slowly.

"God bless my poor wife!" he murmured, faintly. "God bless my little gal! Jean!"

She hung about his neck, sobbing as though her heart would break.

"It's in the—paper, darlin'," he faltered, brokenly; "Gabriel Black has it. You'll do as I—tell you in that paper, dearie?"

"I will, father," she sobbed.

"Sw'ar it, Jean."

"I swear it," she responded, solemnly.

A look of content stole over the old man's face. It was getting dark in the cabin, but dark and light were both alike to him now.

"Good-by, good-by," he whispered, faintly; and ere they scarcely realized it he was gone—gone to that "upper country," where there is no pain or sorrow, never any more.

As soon as the weeping women had been led away from the cabin, and naught remained save the rigid form, which lay there with its white face upturned and ghastly, forth from behind the bed—where he had lurked all this time, his presence undreamed of, serpent that he was—crawled Gabriel Black. His eyes shone with a fiendish delight, and he laughed aloud as he clutched the signed paper.

"The game is in my own hands," he chuckled; "and now, Philip Randall, it lies between you and me—betwixt man and man. You'd better look out for yourself, my friend."

He sneaked away through the coming gloom, and the shades of twilight hid him.

And night descended. Darkness crept on apace. The hoot-owl startled the echo with its frightful shriek; the frogs were croaking in a doleful concert; an occasional night bird flew past the old cabin like a thing of ill-omen; the crickets chirped in the grass, and the placid Tangipahoa flowed onward between its broad, green banks down to Lake Pontchartrain.

And in that sylvan spot a deed of darkness was plotted that night—a deed that would curdle the blood in one's veins. Yet here nature claimed dominion, and the pure, blue sky, spread out with its myriad stars—God's lamps all alight—shone above

it all ; while, unrebuked, the creatures, "made in God's image and after His own likeness," went on their sin-stained way—the only blot on the Maker's handiwork—full of plots against the lives and happiness of their fellow-creatures.

CHAPTER II.

A FATAL MARRIAGE.

The funeral of old David Conway was over. Reverently they laid him to rest—those strong-armed, kind-hearted men, whose lives had been passed in the solitude of the pine forest, and who knew more concerning saw-logs and wharf timber than books, and etiquette, and society's requirements. Yet their hearts were very tender, and more than one eye was conspicuously bright and moist, as they stood around the open grave, and watched their late comrade lowered to his last resting-place.

Philip Randall had come to the timber camp that summer for a long vacation, hoping to grow strong and healthy among the pines. And, being the best shot in the camp, the most accomplished oarsman, the crack swimmer, and, withal, splendidly educated, it was not strange that among those rough men a feeling of admiration, hearty and sincere, had sprung up. For the young chap had not "put on airs;" with all his city breeding, he had quickly learned their ways, and assimilated himself to their simple habits while he remained in their midst. But another sort of feeling had sprung up in Gabriel Black's heart, though of this no one dreamed. Black hated Philip Randall from the first. He hated all lawyers, he said (Philip was a rising member of the bar), and would be heartily glad when the young upstart would leave the place. But that seemed far from the lawyer's intention. He liked the free, untrammelled life of the forest, and his vacation was quite a prolonged one. He had made the acquaintance of old David

Conway on the first day of his arrival, and soon obtained permission to board at the Conway cabin. He liked the old man, with his bluff, honest good humor ; he liked little, timid, shrinking Mrs. Conway—a Kentucky lady by birth, who, having married the backwoodsman, had accepted her lot philosophically, and settled down to life in the pine woods ; but he *loved* the daughter—sole heiress of the house of Conway—bonny Jean, as every one called her.

When Philip first became an inmate of the Conway house, Jean had been passing her vacation at home ; but a short time previous to the opening of my story, she had returned to the seminary in New Orleans, where she was being educated. Jean was like a fairy, blue-eyed, yellow-haired, a perfect little beauty, destined to turn men's heads and derange their hearts. Withal, she was good and pure as an angel, and every man and woman in the camp would have lain down their lives in her defense.

Old Conway had been ailing long, but the last sudden stroke, which had taken him from them, had come quite unexpectedly. Jean had been sent for at once, and her mother had ridden to the station, some ten miles distant, to receive her daughter, and break the news as gently as possible. And they had arrived just in time ; a few moments later and they would have been too late.

And so, it was all over ; and all that remained of the old man, kind husband and tender father, was the long, red, clay-covered mound on the river-bank, beneath the wide-spreading branches of a huge live oak, from whose drooping boughs the long, gray moss trailed, like funeral badges of faded crape, over the old man's grave ; while a mocking-bird, whose nest was near, sang all day long in a neighboring magnolia.

* * * * *

Mrs. Conway and her daughter sat alone in their lonely cabin home the morning after the funeral. The world was all before them, and their life in the pine woods was ended, for they could

remain there no longer, and they must endeavor to lay some plan for the future.

A rap at the door aroused them, and in response to Mrs. Conway's summons the door opened, and Gabriel Black stood before them. He was dressed in a plain suit of black, which made his pale face appear even paler, while his deep, uncanny eyes glared from their cavernous sockets with a wild, unpleasant gleam. In one long, thin, yellow hand he held a folded paper, and as he bowed deferentially, he opened this paper slowly.

"Mrs. Conway," he began, in his sleek, *suave* tone, "Miss Jean, I have in my possession a document, executed at your father's desire, the evening before he died. It had been his intention to ask Mr. Randall, as a lawyer, and of course understanding such matters, to draw up the paper, but Mr. Randall had gone to the village for a doctor, and Mr. Conway feared that when he would return it might be too late, so he begged me to attend to the matter, and of course I did the best I could. You remember, Miss Jean"—he turned suddenly, and his glittering, beady eyes transfixed Jean Conway's blue ones—"your father wished you to promise him something when he was dying; nay, I believe"—here a strange, half smile stole over his repulsive face—"that you *swore* to follow his wishes! Am I correct?"

"You are," returned Jean, coldly, rising as she spoke, and leaning one elbow on the rough wooden mantel; "but I do not understand how that can possibly concern *you*!"

"It concerns me a great deal," he returned, sardonically, "as you will discover when you learn the contents of this paper; and of course no woman would think of breaking an oath made to a dying father! Shall I read the document aloud, Mrs. Conway?" he added, turning to the widow.

She bowed.

"As you like," she returned, quietly.

"Very well."

Gabriel Black drew a long breath of triumph, and began at

once to read from the paper in his hand, while with faces growing slowly pale as death, and eyes dilating with fear and horror, the mother and daughter listened :

“ I, David Conway, being about to leave this world, and go before my Maker, do solemnly express to you, my daughter, Jean Conway, my last wish. It is that you become the wife of my dear and tried friend, Gabriel Black, as soon after my decease as possible. He has been to me the best of friends, and in his hands I leave the disposition of all my wordly affairs.

“ Signed,

DAVID CONWAY,

“ Tangipahoa River.

“ JOHN BURNS, } Witnesses.
“ PETER NORRIS, }

“ May 16th, 18——.”

“ God in heaven !”

Mrs. Conway sprang to her feet, pale as a specter. Jean turned and faced the villain bravely.

“ Gabriel Black !” she cried, sternly, “ do you think to impose upon me with such a fabrication ? You are an impostor, and a cowardly villain. As such I defy you. Leave this house, sir, and never dare again to contaminate it with your presence !”

His midnight eyes swept the young girl from head to foot, and he smiled—a cruel, mocking smile.

“ Not so fast, bonny Jean !” he exclaimed, boldly ; “ not so fast, my fine lady ! Here, Mrs. Conway,” he added, holding the fatal paper before the poor woman’s frightened eyes, “ tell me truly and honestly, is not that signature in David Conway’s handwriting ?”

The widow’s eyes devoured the document, hoping against hope, for some flaw, and as she gazed she trembled like a leaf in the wind.

“ God help us !” she moaned, feebly, “ it is ! Jean, Jean ! there is something here which I cannot understand ; nevertheless, it is your father’s handwriting, without a doubt, and you know his signature was a peculiar one, not easily imitated. But still I cannot—cannot comprehend this thing.”

“ Well, madam,” returned Black, “ I can soon make it clear

to you. Your late husband was aware that I am very wealthy ; that I have large sums of money safely invested ; and as he wished his daughter's future provided for—and yours, too, for, of course, I shall do all in my power, madam, to render you comfortable—and as he respected and esteemed me as a friend, he did me this honor. If you have any doubt concerning the authenticity of this document—though you have already recognized your husband's signature—you have only to question Burns and Norris, the two witnesses, and they will corroborate my words. In conclusion, I have only to add that it is my wish that the ceremony be performed as soon as possible. You two are alone, and need a protector——”

“ I will die first !” cried Jean, indignantly. “ I will never submit, Gabriel Black !”

“ Oh, yes, you will,” he said, softly, but there was a world of meaning in his eyes. “ Perhaps you are thinking of interposition from young Randall ? But, if you cherish such hopes, Miss Jean, you had better dismiss them at once, for Philip Randall is a married man.”

“ That is false !”

“ It is true. His wife is living in New Orleans, and I can prove it to your satisfaction. Furthermore, he has gone back to the city this morning on the early train. Nobody else in the camp here knows his whereabouts, but I have kept my eyes upon his movements for a long time. However, that has nothing to do with the subject in hand. The question is this : Will you consent to a quiet marriage, or will you break the solemn oath sworn to your dying father ?”

“ Jean ! Jean ! My poor child !”

Mrs. Conway wound her arms around her daughter's slender form, and her tears fell fast upon the golden head. Silence reigned throughout the cabin.

“ You dare not break your oath, Jean,” cried her mother, still holding the slim form close to her heart. “ Yet, how *can* you keep it ? My God ! what shall we do ?”

Jean glanced up, her face pale and set, and a strange, firm expression lighting her countenance.

"No, mother," she said, calmly, "I cannot break my oath. Jean Conway has never broken her plighted word. Gabriel Black!"—she turned to the man with a scornful look, and her clear voice rang out in tones of defiance—"you are the most contemptible villain on the face of the earth, and I loathe you more than the vilest reptile in my path. Nevertheless, I have sworn, and I will keep my promise. I will go through the farce of a marriage ceremony whenever you see fit."

"Jean," gasped Mrs. Conway, "wait."

"No," replied the girl, firmly. "if the sacrifice is to be made at all, it may as well be made at once."

Perhaps the poor girl was urged on by the whip of scorpions embodied in the villain's allegations regarding Philip Randall. At all events, her word was passed, there was no going back on it, and Jean knew it.

Gabriel Black had played his cards well. The license was already in his pocket. An illiterate preacher from the nearest village was sent for immediately, and then, much to the amazement of the men in the camp, as well as their honest, kind-hearted wives, the announcement of the expected marriage was speedily made. They gathered from all quarters of the timber camp, and flocked around the open door of the cabin, where Jean stood beside her mother; the faces of the dead could be no whiter than these two; while in Jean's eyes shone a lofty courage, an indomitable will not easily broken.

And so, in the quiet of that fair May day, with the birds chanting the sweetest of anthems in the boughs of the great trees outside the cabins, and the smiling river dashing by merrily, while the golden sunlight lay in shining patches on the new-made grave under the live oak, the ceremony was performed. The poor girl made the requisite responses, and Gabriel Black and Jean Conway were pronounced husband and wife. When it was all over, and the last words of the ceremony

had been said, the bride turned toward the new-made husband, and pointed one trembling finger at the craven.

“Gabriel Black,” she said, slowly, and her voice, though low, was wonderfully clear and distinct, “I have fulfilled my share of this hateful contract. I have become your wife ; but never dare to claim me ; never dare to show your hated face in my presence. Out of my way, sir ! There is *your* road ; *mine* is in another direction.”

And before the astonished group could utter a word, Jean drew her mother’s hand through her arm and led her from the cabin. Gabriel Black stood transfixed with astonishment, too overcome by surprise to attempt pursuit. And the two women hurried away.

In a pasture, inclosed by a rail fence, and quite out of sight of the camp, two horses were grazing peacefully—creole ponies, short of limb and shaggy of hide, but with any amount of “go” in them. These creole ponies possess wonderful endurance. They can carry you miles on a keen gallop, eat rice straw for food, seldom taste grain, and do not know the meaning of a stable. On the river-bank, near by, under a huge cypress tree, a diminutive negro boy lay, a straw hat, without a rim, perched on the back of his wooly head, his face black as ebony, his round eyes lazily watching the fishing-rod, which he patiently held, with the hope of catching a cat-fish for the evening gumbo. Jean approached the boy hastily.

“Zip,” she cried, “come here.”

The boy sprang to his feet, and, having fastened his fishing-rod in the forks of a tree which leaned over the edge of the stream, hastened to where the two stood, doffing his apology for a hat.

“Sarvent, miss,” said he, showing all his ivory teeth in a broad grin.

“Zip,” continued Jean, trying to speak carelessly, “I want you to go into the pasture and catch Dixie and General. Sad-

dle them as quickly as you can, and bring them here. If the horses are ready in ten minutes, I'll give you a dime."

"Yah, yah!" laughed the boy, as he darted off like an arrow from a bow, "I'll do dat, suah."

Mrs. Conway stood nervously clutching Jean's sleeve. She knew that Black did not dream of what was going on; but it would be impossible to keep the truth concealed from him long, and she trembled like an aspen at thought of the certain consequences.

In an incredibly short time the horses were ready, and, slipping the coveted dime into the boy's hand, Jean vaulted into her own saddle, while Mrs. Conway followed suit. Jean gathered the bridle reins in her hand and wheeled her horse about.

"If any one asks any questions, Zip," she commanded, "you don't know anything about us. Do you hear?"

"Yes, Miss Jean."

And the girl stooped and whispered to her mother:

"We will go right to Lee's. I am sure they will shelter us, and perhaps assist us. Come, mother, be brave! Please God, we will escape that villain and punish him yet."

They gave their horses the reins, and flew away over the roads strewn with brown pine leaves, and with the fragrance of the sweet pink azalea all about. On they flew, and long before Black had realized the truth of the situation they were miles away.

CHAPTER III.

THE HOUSE BY THE WAYSIDE.

Meanwhile where was Philip Randall? Early that morning he had arisen determined to start before sunrise for the spot which poor old Conway had indicated as the burial-place of the wonderful treasure. Philip sprang into the pirogue, which

was fastened to a great cypress, and was soon paddling away down stream. He had decided not to reveal the secret to Jean and her mother. They had never dreamed of its existence ; it would be better not to tell them until he had proved that there was no mistake about it. The two, poor things, had trouble enough to bear without enduring what *might* prove to be a grievous disappointment. "Blessed is he who expects nothing," quoth Philip to himself, as he paddled his canoe along, "for then he will not be disappointed."

On he went, pausing at last, when he had neared Lee's Landing. Here he fastened his boat, and hastened on foot.

"A mile below Lee's Landing," he muttered to himself, as he trudged along, "on the river-bank, just above high-water mark ; five gum trees growing in a circle ; odd, that ! Reckon I'll find it—*whew !*"

He paused in astonishment ; for a thick, dense smoke arose in his pathway, and barred his further progress. Thick, black folds of smoke, with fiery tongues darting in and out, licking up everything in their way. Philip realized the truth then. *The woods were on fire !*

"It's not the proper season to burn the grass for the cattle," he ejaculated, in perplexity ; "then how on earth came the fire here ! If it were possible for any one else to be possessed of David Conway's secret, I would declare that some enemy had done this thing ; that this fire is the work of a malicious foe to prevent my going in search of the buried gold, until the woods shall be so so burned that all landmarks will be obliterated."

He glanced around in dismay. No hope ! Fire to the right of him, save where the river ran on cheating it in its work of destruction ; fire to the left—a horrible wall of seething flame ; fire before him—a dreadful dividing line, before which no power on earth could pass and live. It was no use ; he must return, his object ungained.

He had desired to find the place, then return and dig for the hidden treasure ; and, once in possession, he would have gone

to Mrs. Conway and delivered it to her, then—he dared think no further in the future. He loved Jean with all his heart ; he was good, and true, and honorable, and he had reason to believe that Jean cared for him ; but no words of love had ever passed between them. There is a language of the eye which speaks from heart to heart, and often expresses more than lip or tongue.

Full of disappointment, Philip re-entered the boat, turned it about, and so went back to the timber camp. He had scarcely landed on his arrival when Gabriel Black appeared.

“ Here, Randall,” he began, in a friendly manner, “ here is a telegram which one of the boys brought out from the station for you. No bad news, I hope.”

Philip tore it hastily open. As he glanced it over, his face paled, and his eyes were full of sadness.

“ Bad news, indeed !” he exclaimed. “ My mother is dying, and I must go home at once. But before I go I must see Mrs. Conway and—Miss Jean.”

“ They have gone to pass the day with some friends, I am told,” remarked Gabriel Black, quietly. “ Leave a line of adieu for them, Randall. I will see that they receive it.”

Of course Philip did not dream of any duplicity, and he fell into the snare at once. He scribbled a friendly note to the two ladies, and left it in Black’s care. Then, without waiting to pack his clothes, he sprang on the back of Gabriel’s horse, which stood saddled near by, and which its owner *willingly* loaned, and was out of sight in a moment.

He arrived in New Orleans that night, and went straight home, and the first person whom he met—alive and well—was his mother. Philip saw at once that there was some plot, and that he was the victim.

“ I begin to perceive,” he cried desperately, “ that there is something in the wind, and I believe that Black is at the bottom of it all. For some reason he wants to get me out of the way, but he has mistaken his man. I am going back to the pine

woods just as quickly as I can get there, if I perish in the attempt."

* * * * *

It was a fearful night ; a night of storm and tempest ; the very demons of destruction seemed to stalk abroad. The rain came down in blinding sheets ; the thunder rolled like crashing artillery ; athwart the inky blackness of the sky the lightning shot in broad, sulphurous flashes, revealing for a moment the dense forest, the swollen river dragging itself sullenly along ; while over all the wind swept howling through the branches of the pine trees like the wail of a lost soul. The sheets of lightning which dashed across the heavens with their lurid flashes disclosed a horseman making his way with difficulty through the night and tempest ; now pausing an instant, overcome by the ferocity of the warring elements, and shrinking down in his saddle in the darkness, as though hoping to avoid destruction ; or, perchance, with that instinct which draws one nearer a living creature in such a strait, even though an unreasoning brute.

"My God !" broke from the lips of the traveler at last, as a gust of wind, fiercer than usual, dashed by him, tearing his hat, rain-soaked though it was, from his head, and nearly knocking him from his saddle. "Mercy ! what a witch's saturnalia it is, to be sure ! Must I perish out here alone in this frightful storm and darkness ? And I a stranger in these fearful woods. I have lost my road, I know that, and I know not which way to turn. I am afraid of riding my horse into the river, or dashing my brains out against a giant tree. Oh, Heaven, for a single ray of light ! Ha ! what's that ? Can it be a light ?—a shelter, perhaps !"

He drew rein as he spoke before a dark object which loomed up before him—a darker patch on the midnight gloom. Yes ; one tiny, dull, red ray of light pierced the Tartarean darkness like a glaring eye, while upon his ear fell the faint and indistinct murmur of voices.

"A house, I verily believe!" he exclaimed, joyfully. "Hal-loa!" he shouted, wildly. "halloa! I say!"

Instantly the light faded, and perfect silence reigned. It was like an enchanted house in a fairy tale. But Philip Randall—for it was he—was not the man to be vanquished and overcome by small obstacles. Dismounting from his horse, he led him by the bridle onward through the horrible darkness; on, on, he stumbled against something at last. An exclamation of surprise broke from his lips, as, putting forth his hand, he discovered it was a door-step. Passing his hand along the side of the building, he was enabled at length to find the door, and proceeded to execute a series of knocks which made the echoes ring.

"Surly devils!" he muttered, grimly, "to shut a traveler out in this storm!"

For a long time he rapped, eliciting no response, but within the fierce growling of dogs was distinctly audible, and he knew that the house was occupied. But at last, since "Patience has its sure reward," his, too, was rewarded. The door opened slightly, and a man's gruff voice demanded:

"Who's there?"

"Well, you've been a long time answering," retorted Philip, not in the best of humor. "Is it the fashion in this country to refuse a man admittance in a duse of a gale like this?"

"Don't know nothin' 'bout no fashions," responded the man inside, surlily. "Do you want to come in, or don't ye? I'm old Bill Corney, and I've kept this here place—the Red Tavern, it's called—for four-and-twenty years, come and gone."

"Ah!" cried Philip, eagerly pushing his way inside as he spoke, "a country tavern, eh? Then why on earth don't you invite me in, and give me some supper and a bed, and have my horse attended to? You'll lose nothing by it, old man, I promise you."

The old man led the way without another word, and Philip, overjoyed at the prospect of a roof over his head, followed his

host inside. It was a great dark room, lighted by a single tallow candle, which threw a little patch of red light in the center, and left the rest of the apartment in eerie shadows. The old man hastened to the huge fire-place and tossed a great light-wood kot upon the little heap of coals that smoldered there. Instantly a broad, bright light flashed up, and in a moment the room was brilliantly illuminated.

"Will you have my horse attended to?" inquired Philip. "Can you have him well rubbed down, and give him a good feed?"

"Yes, sir," replied Mr. Corney, "I can, and what's more, I will."

He threw open a door at the end of the room as he spoke.

"Here, you, Sam," he shouted, "come here."

And when the half-grown, long-limbed stripling had appeared, Philip turned and examined his host attentively. Not at all prepossessing, surely! He was tall and thin to gauntness, with a round bullet head, covered with a coarse shock of red hair; his squint eyes were of a greenish color, and his broad mouth was full of great yellow teeth, like fangs. Philip was constrained to admit that he had never beheld a more evil countenance.

But he was too glad of a shelter for the night to cavil at so small a matter as his host's *tout ensemble*.

"I'll go and see about your supper now," announced Mr. Corney, as he dispatched Sam to the stables.

He left the room as he spoke, and Philip was alone. He drew nearer the glowing fire, vaguely conscious that he was comfortable, and safely housed, "and for all these things devoutly thankful."

All at once he heard a voice close behind him—a voice which whispered in his ear, and made him start as though he had been shot. Yet he knew that there was nobody, not a living soul, in the room save himself.

"Philip Randall!" said the voice, and its accents, though

low, were stern and menacing, "you have walked straight into the lion's jaws, and you are caught in a trap. Be warned, for I tell you this is a house of fearful secrets, and you will never leave it alive!"

CHAPTER IV.

PERIL.

Philip sprang to his feet, with a wildly beating heart, as the strange words, in that low, ghostly voice, fell upon his ear. He glanced about him cautiously. The great, bare room, with its low ceiling—guiltless of plaster—crossed by dark, smoke-grimed rafters overhead, and lighted by the leaping, blazing "light-wood" in the huge fire-place, met his gaze. A spindle-legged table, upon which lay a pack of greasy cards, a long, low wooden settle, a dozen chairs, with cowhide seats in various stages of decay, were all upon which fell his eager gaze. Half-paralyzed with horror and surprise, Philip stood—his eyes fastened upon the door through which his host had disappeared. Suddenly it opened, and Mr. Corney was once more visible.

"Supper's ready, sir," he answered, with a grim attempt at a smile, which only revealed more decidedly his natural hideousness—"this way, sir, if you please!"

Philip marked the sudden tone of servility, and wondered at the change in his host's demeanor—wondered with an uneasy foreboding of coming evil. But he was very tired and hungry; the cheerful fire had dried his garments and revived his spirits; so, thrusting one hand into the inner pocket, where his trusty revolver was safely stored for possible contingencies, Philip followed Mr. Corney into the adjoining apartment.

A second huge fire-place occupied nearly one whole side of this room, and a great oak log lay smoldering into glowing coals, rendering the room peculiarly cozy and comfortable. Before the fire a table had been laid for one person. There

was a dearth of table-cloth, while napkins were an unknown luxury in that remote region; china ware, also, was at a considerable discount—"like angels' visits, few and far between"—yet the supper made up for all other deficiency. Trout from the sparkling Tangipahoa, a haunch of venison, roast duck, the inevitable corn dodger, roast yams, rice, and black coffee, constituted the bill of fare, and Philip, sitting down at once, did it ample justice. Mr. Corney had slouched away from the room, but when Philip had concluded his repast, he returned, bringing a small waiter, upon which were two glasses.

"Here, sir," he began, that same horrible leer disfiguring his far from handsome features—"here is as good a Tom and Jerry as ever you'll git in New Orleans, I reckon. I thought 'twould do you good arter such a mighty bad wetting'; so I fixed hit myself, and, if you please, we'll drink together. This here's for you," indicating one of the glasses with a dingy forefinger.

Philip took the glass, and Mr. Corney placed the waiter, with the remaining glass, upon the table, and turned to poke the fire. That operation in the pine woods usually consists in a series of vigorous kicks at the back log with a pair of hob-nailed boots. While this process was going on, Philip sat glancing from one glass of liquor to the other, and a queer idea entered his brain and lodged there. Yielding to this curious impulse, he lifted his own glass, and, unnoticed by his host, whose back was turned, he quietly exchanged glasses. As soon as he had done this thing, Philip could have laughed at his own absurdity. But he drank the Tom and Jerry, while Mr. Corney imitated his example, draining the liquor at one draught, and smacking his lips with intense satisfaction. Then, sitting down before the fire, the old man proceeded leisurely to light his pipe.

Mr. Corney made no attempt at conversation, and Philip sat there, to all intents and purposes, alone; and, at last, turning toward his host, he saw that he was fast asleep—not a natural, easy slumber, but a heavy lethargy.

Philip stood for a moment gazing upon the unconscious man. It was not the effects of the liquor that he had imbibed ; Philip knew that old Corney had been perfectly sober, and the Tom and Jerry would surely not have so seriously affected this tough old pine woods veteran ; so Philip was forced to conclude at length that the liquor which had been intended for himself had been drugged.

Foul play, then, was meant. First to stupefy his senses, then rob him, and probably put an end to his existence. He had a fine gold watch and a considerable sum of money upon his person ; his horse, which he had just purchased in New Orleans, was worth the two hundred dollars which he had paid for him ; there was, altogether, quite enough plunder to be gained by putting him out of the way, and every occurrence, as well as the strange warning words to which he had listened, pointed to something sinister and evil. Philip stood there beside the sleeping man and thought it all over. He was in a tight place, decidedly, for he was sure that the worst was meant. Sometimes God gives us warning, or premonition, of coming danger. When the skies are fair, and there is apparently nothing to fear, He, knowing what is coming into our lives, sends us certain warning ; but we often laugh at our own superstitious folly (so we term it), and disregard the presentments which are hung like danger signals across our pathway, and then we inevitably suffer.

Philip began to see that he had made no mistake. But he must perforce remain in that dismal place until morning, and he must be on his guard. Carefully he drew his revolver from his pocket and examined its contents. It was a six-shooter, and loaded to the muzzle. With a look of satisfaction on his face, Philip returned it to its hiding-place, just as the low murmur of voices fell upon his ears. He glanced toward old Corney. The old man was sleeping as though his life depended on the soundness of his slumbers, and Philip ventured to move cautiously forward in the direction from whence the voices

seemed to proceed. He discovered then that there was still another room, and through the keyhole in the door all sounds were distinctly audible. Philip paused and listened, scarcely daring to breathe.

"Wonder if it's knocked him over yet?" were the first words that floated to his ears. "A pretty stiff dose the old man put in."

"Where is old man Corney all this time?" inquired another voice; and Philip Randall started as though he had received an electric shock, for *it was the voice of Gabriel Black!*

"Oh, he went in the room to do the agreeable," cried the other; "he'll stay there while the young feller's gettin' asleep; sort o' 'rock me to sleep' motion, you know. Reckon old Bill will tune up, and sing him a lullaby!"

A general laugh followed this sally, and Philip knew that there were probably half a dozen men in the other apartment; truly the odds were fearfully against him.

But Philip Randall came of a good stock. The Randalls had never been cowards; from the time—more than a century ago—when old John Randall had held a fort with a pitiful handful of men, against a band of maddened savage Iroquois, to the present day, no cowardly action had tarnished their escutcheon; and Philip, standing there in that den of thieves and cut-throats, reviewed his situation rapidly, with the brave determination to sell his life dearly and to "die game."

All at once an inspiration came to him. He went back to the fire, and sitting down, he pillowed his head on one arm, which rested on the table, and composed his features as though he were wrapped in slumber. Ten minutes passed. The warm fire began to make Philip drowsy, sure enough; he felt himself really dozing at last, when suddenly the door leading from the other room opened noiselessly, and some one entered. There was a subdued chuckle of satisfaction as their eyes fell upon the apparently slumbering man; and the next thing that Philip knew he was lifted in half a dozen strong arms, and borne from

the room. Into still another apartment they carried him, and Philip began to suspect that he had stumbled upon an enchanted palace, with no end of chambers, when he felt himself deposited carefully upon a bed. The men withdrew cautiously, the door closed after them, and Philip heard the key turn in the lock. He opened his eyes—darkness—profound and deep as Erebus—met his gaze.

He passed his hands slowly over the bedside—it was a narrow bed—and at that instant he heard, distinctly, a hollow groan. Terrified immeasurably, he sprang to his feet, and began to grope his way through the darkness. Another groan, and still another, and then a cold hand was laid upon his own, while that same strange, sepulchral voice which he had already heard once before that night whispered in his ear :

“If you lie on that bed you will die. They mean murder !”

Philip's heart was beating wildly, with great, mad, tumultuous bounds ; you could hear it distinctly, there in the dreadful darkness. He groped about in the gloom, wildly hoping to find the creature—whatever or whoever it might be—that had breathed those warning words ; but his hand came in contact with the door of the room, and he paused there, holding the knob of the door in his grasp. All at once a strange rushing noise filled the air. Oh, if he only had a match, he would discover what demoniac work was going on.

He felt in all his pockets—yes, thank God ! there were two. Never in all his life before had Philip Randall understood the value of so simple a thing as a common lucifer match.

He drew them forth, and struck them carefully on the wall beside him. A blue flame arose, and flickered higher and higher ; by its faint light Philip took a hasty survey of his surroundings. There was absolutely no one present save himself ; his ghostly visitor had vanished. The room was small and bare, with one window. It contained no furniture save the

bed, and as his eyes fell upon that, his heart gave a sudden bound of horror, and stood still.

The bed was made with a small, square canopy, or "tester," over head, from which a mosquito bar usually depends; and as Philip gazed he saw that the canopy was being moved by machinery in the roof of the house, and was slowly but surely descending, and had he remained in the bed he would have been almost instantly suffocated, and a dreadful death would have been his certain fate.

Philip had read of such a horrible contrivance; but now he saw it all—saw by the faint, flickering light of the matches which he held in his hand—now burning fainter and dimmer, and at last expiring altogether and leaving him in total darkness. He knew that the fiends who had attempted his life would wait until they believed the success of their crime to be certain—until the terrible agonies of so awful a dissolution would be over, and Philip, a crushed and distorted corpse, would lie there upon the bed under that death-dealing canopy; and then they would lift its ponderous weight by means of the same machinery, and gather around to rob his body, like vultures around their prey.

Oh! was it not fearful? What should he do? How could he ever escape from that den of iniquity? Philip stood with both hands clasped, and stared straight before him through the darkness.

CHAPTER V.

THE NEXT STEP.

"Steady, Flirt! Easy, now—over we go!"

The speaker was a young girl—a dark, piquant brunette, with saucy black eyes, crimson cheeks, and pouting lips. Her hair, of midnight blackness, hung in one long plait down her back, and was tied with a scarlet ribbon. Her riding-habit, of black

cloth, fitted the petite form as though it had been molded to every curve of the dainty, elegant figure, and her black straw hat, shading the delicate face, was turned up on one side, with a couple of long, black ostrich plumes which swept over the graceful, sloping shoulders.

The horse—Flirt, as it was called—was a slender-limbed, high-stepping creature, whose every movement betrayed its pedigree. Flirt had come of good old Kentucky blue-grass stock, and there was not her match in the whole pine woods.

Horse and mistress were both perfection, and a pretty picture they made as they stood, the young lady laughing gayly, on the opposite side of the rail fence which they had just leaped, and which inclosed a large rice field. The girl stooped in the saddle and patted the arched neck of the horse approvingly.

“Well done, Flirt!” she cried; “though I expect we will suffer for our temerity, for here we are, in Mr. John Averill’s rice field; and, upon my word, yonder comes Mr. John Averill himself!”

For a tall, slim figure was coming down the field with rapid strides—a young man in his shirt-sleeves, with gray nether garments, and a broad-brimmed straw hat upon his close-cut brown hair; a man with grave, dark eyes, and stern, determined features, and a heavy dark mustache.

He lifted his hat as his eyes fell upon the intruder, and an amused smile chased away the frown of annoyance which had crossed his face at sight of a horse and rider within the sacred precincts of his rice field.

“Good-evening, Miss Lee,” he began. “Are you not a little out of your road?”

“Lady Lee,” as she was called (her name was Adelaide), blushed a trifle, then her saucy, willful nature reasserted itself.

“No,” she returned; “your field brings me half a mile nearer home, so I thought I’d go through it. The path through the center is quite wide enough for Flirt and me.”

John Averill smiled.

"You've a cool way of doing things, Lady," he remarked, dropping one brown hand upon the arched neck of Flirt as he spoke; "but since you *are* here, don't you think that you may as well give me my answer? I have waited two whole weeks for some response; I'm tired of waiting, Lady. I'm not too patient a man, and I want to know—I *must* know, if you intend to be my wife?"

Lady Lee's dark head drooped, as though to repress a smile, and her luminous eyes flashed saucily.

"Stand and deliver!" she cried, laughing a merry peal of laughter which would do one good to hear. "Behold the brigand at my horse's head! Your money or your life!"

"No, Lady."

John Averill transferred his hand from Flirt's neck to the neatly gloved hand of her mistress, which lay upon the pommel of the saddle.

"It is your *heart*," he continued, "that I besiege and demand—yes, *demand*!" he repeated, quickly, as a flush of anger crossed Lady's dark face. "You have surely given me warrant for believing that I should eventually win you. I have waited for my answer now longer than most men would have waited; I am no patient Jacob, to wait uncomplainingly on any woman's caprices. I have known you so long, Lady, and have loved you so long, that I want my answer. Will you be my wife, Lady Lee? Because I intend to marry you whether or no!"

"Wait until the next time I see you," laughed the irrepressible Lady, flicking a fly from Flirt's ears with her little riding-whip. "I've decided to leap the rails again, and not go through your rice field, after all. You might sue me for damages, you know."

She drew her bridle-rein as she spoke, and Flirt dropped down upon her haunches; Lady touched her lightly with the whip-lash, and they were over the fence in a twinkling, and standing in the green, shady road on the other side.

"Good-by, Mr. Averill!" she cried, executing a military salute

with graceful precision ; and, with a low chirrup to Flirt, the little witch was off like the wind.

The young man followed her with his eyes as long as she was visible ; then he removed his hat and passed one hand over his heated brow, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

“She drives me wild !” he ejaculated. “Capricious little thing ! But she will be my wife—I know it—I swear it !—just as sure as yonder sun is in the sky above me ! It’s worth waiting for. By Jove ! who’s that ?”

For two horses had come tearing through the woods just at the edge of the rice field. It was Mrs. Conway and Jean. They reined in their horses, and the young planter came forward to meet the ladies.

He knew the Conways well, yet the recent sad occurrences at the timber camp had not yet reached his ears. Living several miles distant, the roads half the time impassable, this was not at all strange. So they repeated their sad story, and that they intended to seek present shelter at Mrs. Lee’s.

“The best step you could take !” cried John Averill, cordially. “They will assist you, I am sure. Miss Adelaide passed here a few moments ago, bound for home.”

They whipped up their horses, and hastened on, hoping to overtake her.

Hardly had the two ladies disappeared from sight, when a negro man crept out from a thicket of blackberry bushes on the roadside, and approaching young Averill, began to speak in a low, cautious tone.

The young man listened eagerly, his cheek paling, and a strange light leaping into his handsome dark eyes.

When the negro had finished what he had to tell, Averill leaped the rail fence at a single bound, and hastened away to the long, low, white house on the river-bank, which was his home, and where he was wont to announce that he “kept bachelor’s hall.” Entering the house, he hurriedly changed his clothing, and mounting a horse which the negro had hastily

saddled, he rode away as though life and death depended on his speed.

* * * * *

In the meantime, Jean and her mother had reached Mrs. Lee's hospitable house—large, roomy, and comfortable, where the old man lived with his wife and his only child, Adelaide.

Lady and Jean Conway had long been dear friends, and all the gayety faded from the girl's dark face as she listened to Jean's sad story. When it was finished, she wound her arms about Jean's neck, and their tears fell together.

"Dear Jean," whispered Lady, softly, "you shall get out of this villain's power. If once you can reach New Orleans in safety, you can start for the North, and then you will be safe, and can decide what step to take to free you permanently from his clutches. That Gabriel Black—I've always hated the wretch!—must have influenced your father in some dreadful way. I'm sure there has been a frightful mistake, and now—but, poor Jean! it is too late!"

"Too late!" repeated Jean, sadly. "But, Lady, you will keep us here to-night, and in the morning we will go on—out to the station. Fortunately, I have enough to carry us to New Orleans; and once there, I have friends to whom to appeal for advice and assistance."

That very night it began to rain; the same fearful storm, in which poor Philip had come to grief, devastated the country. The rain fell in blinding sheets, swelling the river fearfully, while the creeks and small streams, in which that region abounds, grew to huge affairs, and some of them were impassable. It rained until the afternoon of the next day; then it broke off, and the clouds began to disperse. The river was away over its banks; but Jean and her mother, knowing that they must lose no time, determined to at least make the attempt, and to start on their journey at once.

So, as soon as dinner was over, they bade the Lees a tearful

farewell, and rode away in the direction of the river, which they were obliged to cross. There were no bridges over the Tangipahoa. Usually a peaceful, pretty, winding stream, it was crossed by means of a primitive-looking flat-boat.

With great difficulty they persuaded the negro ferryman to attempt the passage; but the promise of a dollar from Mrs. Conway, and the earnest pleading of Jean, were not without effect; so old Uncle Ned consented at last. They dismounted, and led their horses to the flat by the bridles, and the darkey pushed out from the shore. It was impossible to use the oars in that boiling, seething flood, which eddied and swirled around them; so Uncle Ned concluded to "pole" them across—a tedious operation at best, but, under the circumstances, almost superhuman efforts were required. Jean and her mother stood watching the scene around them with dismay, when suddenly Uncle Ned lost his balance and fell into the water. In his fright and demoralization, the pole dropped from his hands. The old fellow could not swim a stroke, but at length he succeeded in scrambling back upon the flat, to find with horror that the pole lay floating in the water some twenty feet away, and the flat was turning round and round in dizzy eddies, bobbing up and down like a cork from the force of the current. They must depend on the oars, then. Uncle Ned seized them in wild desperation, and went to work with such zeal, that one of the frail things suddenly snapped in twain.

With a low cry of horror the two women stood, their faces pale as death, while the flat, at the mercy of wind and waves, floated swiftly down stream.

CHAPTER VI.

THE VIGILANTES.

For some time Philip stood half stunned with horror ; then a flash of lightning streamed through the room, and lit up the darkness. The storm, which had lulled, was about to break out afresh, then ! Well, no matter, so long as the lightning would serve to show him where he was ; and that the streak—blue and sulphurous—had reminded him of the existence of the window in the room.

With a heart beating wildly with hope—that hope which dies so hard in the breast of the young—Philip made his way to the window and slowly raised the sash. It seemed that the villains had been so certain of their victim that they had not thought it necessary to secure the window. Philip paused an instant to collect his thoughts. Footsteps outside the door and voices fell upon his ear ; they were coming to rob their prey, and bear the body away for burial. He felt for his revolver ; it was safe. Then he crept softly out and over the window-sill. A trifling leap and he was down upon the ground, but only to find himself caught by a pair of strong hands.

“Ten thousand devils!” ejaculated a man’s voice, in a low tone ; “he could never have escaped !”

Without a second’s pause, Philip wrenched his right hand free and quickly drew his revolver. At that short range he ought to have killed his man ; but the darkness was intense, and his antagonist, perhaps divining Philip’s intention, suddenly sprang backward as Philip fired at random.

A wild yell of pain rent the air, and Philip fled away through the darkness and gloom like a madman. A providential flash of lightning showed him the stable a few rods distant. He

dashed away in its direction, and still relying upon the lightning to guide him, he managed to enter and secure his horse without any obstacle intervening to prevent. In a few moments more he had sprung upon the horse, and dashed off through the darkness—he knew not whither. But better the trackless forest, in the storm and darkness, than to be left to the mercies of those fiends in human guise. He could hear them cursing and raving, knew that they were searching for him who had so miraculously escaped them; but Philip determined to elude them if possible; if not, he would sell his life dearly. And so he pushed onward, not knowing whither.

The clatter of horses' feet behind him told him at length that he was indeed pursued. He concluded to hide himself from observation, if possible, and perhaps they would pass him by unnoticed.

Fortunately, there was a group of huge oaks near, growing so close together as to form quite a barrier; he found his way behind them, and checking his horse, sat as quiet as the dead.

On came his pursuers, armed, and with lighted lanterns. The roads were so full of mud and water that the foot-prints of Philip's horse were not discernible, and to track him by that means was, therefore, out of the question. Philip sat bolt upright in the saddle, scarcely venturing to breathe; the lights flashed past him—they were gone!

He determined to wait there until the morning, then perchance he could find his way and finish his journey. For he still determined to go back to the timber camp—back to Jean; and although he perished in the attempt, as he had said, his mind was made up to go on.

Morning dawned at last, lowering, but not raining, and Philip emerged from his hiding-place and rode on over the road—little more than a bridle-path. He found himself in a portion of the country with which he was totally unacquainted, and not a trace of a human being or a habitation was in sight. He rode along leisurely, still meeting no one; the day grew on,

and finally the lengthening shadows began to warn him that another night would soon come down. What should he do? He was half famished and beginning to grow weak. He could not imagine where he was, or in what direction to look for the timber camp. If he could only reach the river he felt confident of finding his way; the camp was down stream, and perhaps he might succeed in reaching there, after all.

With this hope he struck out in a fresh direction. On he traveled, through mud and water; splashed with mold and great blotches of mother earth; but still on he pressed, determined not to give up. Toward sunset he came upon a cabin standing in the midst of a dense thicket of pines. To all appearance it was uninhabited; there was no smoke coming from its chimney, and no visible sign of life about. He decided to remain here for the night; it would be a shelter, at least. So he dismounted, and tying his horse in such a manner that he was at liberty to graze, Philip passed around the cabin to find an entrance. A few paces farther and he paused in surprise at the sound of voices within. The place was occupied, then, after all. Something—some cadence in one of the voices—struck Philip as unpleasantly familiar; involuntarily he drew near the cabin, which was of rough logs, and applied his eye to an aperture.

This was what he saw: A dozen men—rough, outlaw-looking fellows—were sitting and standing in various attitudes around the room; while in their midst—his ugly face pale and haggard, and one arm bandaged—stood Gabriel Black.

“Ha!” thought Philip, smiling in spite of his danger, “it was Black that I hit, then. Well, so much the better; for I know beyond a doubt now that that man is my bitter, implacable enemy.”

He bent his head to listen, not daring to breathe scarcely, while Gabriel Black spoke:

“Boys,” he was saying, with an air of command, “you have sworn to stand by me, have you not?”

"We have, captain," responded a rough-looking customer. "We swore to stand by each other when this here band was first organized, and we've done that thing so far."

"Very well; I know that you have. Then let me advise you of the next step to take. We have made our name a terror throughout the entire South. Every one has heard of the vigilantes, and they have learned to tremble at our power. We work in silence and secrecy—our watchword '*Vendetta*,' our motto 'Booty and Beauty'; and in the darkness of night we track our victim down to his certain destruction. And should one of us break his fearful oath, or in any way prove faithless to his trust, he is speedily punished. You all know the penalty for offense?"

"*Death!*" returned the men, unanimously.

Gabriel Black smiled grimly.

"Ay, *death!*" he hissed, venomously; "and the first one of you who deserves it will get all he deserves. And now, since we are sworn to help each other, and our mission is to aid the brotherhood, to the exclusion of all other considerations, I wish you to help me in the pursuit of the two women, Mrs. Conway and her daughter, Bonny Jean, who, you know, is my wife."

As the words passed the lips of the villain, Philip Randall uttered an involuntary exclamation of horror and amazement. Instantly Gabriel Black strode forward, opened the door of the cabin, and the two stood face to face. A change came over Black's visage.

"You sneaking devil!" he hissed, with savage vindictiveness, "I have you at last! Comrades," he turned to the others, who had followed him out of the cabin, "this man is a spy! What is the penalty for such a transgression?"

"*Death!*" cried the vigilantes, flocking around.

CHAPTER VII.

"STRUNG UP."

For a moment Philip Randall stood erect and fearless before the sinister gaze of Gabriel Black. The villain's snaky eyes were bent upon the young man's handsome face with a look of unutterable hatred. He drew nearer, and dropped one hand upon Philip's shoulder.

"Hands off!" cried Philip, contemptuously; "don't dare to touch me, Gabriel Black. I'd sooner encounter any other reptile that lives than you!"

Black's yellow face flushed angrily.

"Now," continued Philip, quietly, "I have a question to ask you, and I demand an answer. What did you mean just now when you asserted that Jean Conway is your wife?"

A glare of triumph lighted up the villain's face.

"Because she *is*!" he answered, doggedly. "Do you doubt it? If so, read that."

He flourished the marriage certificate before Philip's face. He saw at once the import of the document, and grew deadly pale.

"How do I know but that this is a forgery?" he asked, quietly. "I do not trust such creatures as you, Gabriel Black, now that I have found out your real character."

Black laughed derisively.

"Don't, eh?" he cried. "Well, look at that, then."

He unfolded a second paper, and, keeping his grasp tight upon it, allowed Philip to glance it over. It was the fatal contract signed by David Conway upon his death-bed. Philip trembled like a leaf as he realized the truth.

"Black," he said, striving hard to be calm, "I believe that there is some deception and fraud here. Mr. Conway, on his

death-bed, told me—gave me—” he hesitated, and then plunged on desperately—“he promised Jean to me.”

“*You lie!*”

Philip sprang forward and caught the ruffian by the throat.

“You’ll not repeat that, Gabriel Black,” he groaned in desperation, “or I’ll have your worthless life!”

“Wait!” panted the other—Philip’s hand involuntarily relaxed his grasp upon his throat—“wait until I tell you. Jean loves me, or, of course, she would not have married me. I could not force her to become my wife. Such a marriage would be illegal.”

Philip saw that there was reason in his words, and released his gasping victim. Once free, Gabriel Black drew himself up, and continued :

“She *is* my wife ; but her mother has instigated Jean to accompany her to New Orleans, and I do not intend that they shall go. Therefore I propose to follow, and put an end to their foolish journey. My wife must obey me.”

Philip’s brow grew dark with anger, yet pity for the unfortunate girl rushed over his heart like a flood.

Black still stood before him, and the other vigilantes gathered around, waiting for their captain’s commands.

They did not have to wait long.

“You are in *my* power now, Mr. Randall,” said Black, at length, “and I intend to give you your just deserts. Men!”—he turned to the group of dark-faced outlaws—“this man is a spy upon our actions ; you know the penalty?”

“*Death!*” hissed the men, as in one voice.

“Death it shall be!” responded Black, savagely ; “and the best way to settle all controversy. Here are pine trees enough and to spare. String him up, men, and have done with it.”

They closed around their prisoner in an instant. Philip drew his revolver quickly, and pointed it straight at the heart of Gabriel Black.

“One step nearer,” he cried, in a clear, ringing, defiant

voice, "and I will shoot you through the heart! You lying villain, you shall die a dog's death!"

For a moment Black *did* pause, awed by the white, resolute face of the young man, and the determined glitter of his dark, handsome eyes; then a sardonic smile crept over his saturnine features, and he raised one hand commandingly.

"Disarm him, vigilantes!" he shouted; "knock that pistol from his hand and string him up! There are ropes in the cabin."

Still Philip stood alone in the midst of that malignant, scowling group.

"Dare to touch me," he said, calmly, "and the man who attempts it will get this!"

He pointed his weapon at the crowd; but one of the men, unnoticed, slipped up behind him, and with a well-directed blow from behind dashed the revolver from his hand. Then they sprang upon him, and while one hastily brought the ropes from the cabin the others held him firmly, and ere many minutes Philip was securely bound. He faced them resolutely.

"Dogs!" he cried, "you have made a wonderful conquest; ten to one—a brave deed! I congratulate you."

Something like shame touched the hearts of the men; they wavered and drew back, but their captain motioned them on.

"Select a tree," he commanded, with fiendish joy at the prospect of being forever rid of his hated rival; "and make haste about it, too; I haven't time to linger here long, and I want to see the end of this business."

They bore Philip, bound hand and foot, to where a huge pine tree waved its arms aloft, one immense branch standing out like a skeleton arm, and upon this they fastened the rope securely and made a slip-noose. Gabriel Black could scarcely contain himself, so intense was his satisfaction at the prospect. This was more than he dared to hope for or dream of—that Philip should be removed from his path, and he himself (for Black was an arrant coward) would not be held responsible,

since it would be deemed the act of the famous vigilantes, the secret band of desperadoes whose fearful deeds had long caused the hearts of the people to thrill with horror and alarm. More than one dead body had been discovered ere now dangling from a giant tree, blackened, distorted, and cold in death ; the horrible buzzards crowding around for their awful feast. And upon each body the one word "vigilantes" would be found, in great, black letters, staring the passer-by in the face.

They reached the foot of the tree upon which they proposed carrying out their fearful intention, and were about to commence operations, when suddenly from a thicket of pines and scrub oaks near by, a hollow, sepulchral voice was heard.

"Gabriel Black !"

The villain started as though he had been struck, and turned deadly pale.

"Who's there?" he cried, half fearfully.

"Gabriel Black," the voice repeated, "*beware!*"

He laughed uneasily.

"Some fool is trying to frighten me," he cried ; "it will not be well if I discover his identity !"

"Gabriel Black !" repeated the voice for the third time, "*beware!* The day of retribution is drawing nigh !"

"String him up !" shouted Black, wildly, "string him up ! I'll see Phil Randall hanged if I give my own life to do it !"

Obedient to the summons, the vigilantes surrounded the tree, and all hands made ready to carry out their murderous design.

The young man was pale and quiet ; he saw that death was very near him, but he did not flinch. His hated enemy should not have the satisfaction of seeing a trace of fear in Philip Randall ; he would go to his death as a brave man should.

Slowly they drew him up, while some one rolled an empty barrel from the old cabin and placed it beneath the feet of the unfortunate man.

Raised to that height, Philip could easily discern the sur-

rounding country, and he saw, with intense agony, that the river was not far off; it was within range of his vision, and, had his feet been guided thither, he might have been on the road to the timber camp. Once there, he would find out all about Jean, and know the worst.

At length one of the vigilantes stepped upon the barrel to adjust the noose about Philip's neck. As he did so, he happened to glance toward the river. A change passed over his countenance; he stopped in his work, and sprang to the ground. Touching Gabriel Black on the shoulder, he led him apart from the others.

"My God!" he ejaculated, in a low tone. "Look! See—out upon the river a flat is drifting down, and if it isn't Jean Conway and her mother on board I'm a Frenchman—that's all! Captain, if you want your wife, she's on there!"

Black glanced in the direction indicated, and his keen eyes took in the situation at once.

"You're right, Dunnington," he said, briefly, "and we must make haste—all of us, or it may be too late. This little business here can wait till our return."

He started off in the direction of the river, followed by the whole desperate crew, leaving their prisoner still bound, the noose about his neck.

Hardly were they gone when Philip felt something touch the rope. Nobody was there; but, as he gazed, a hand, white, dimpled, and beautiful—evidently the hand of a woman—emerged from the pine thicket, and the sharp, keen blade of a knife cleft the rope that bound him. In a moment he was free, and—never dreaming that Jean was near him—he sprang upon the back of his horse, and was out of sight in a moment.

CHAPTER VIII.

HUNTED DOWN.

Down the river—swollen, and turbid, and angry—came the frail craft, with the three frightened human beings, and the horses, half frightened with terror, their eyes and nostrils dilated wildly, and pawing the flat-boat with their feet, as if they would stamp it into fragments. On came the flat. Now it whirled around and around in dizzy eddies, now they were in immediate danger of coming, with all the force of which it was capable, against some giant tree ; for the river had spread out and widened until it was over the land, and the swift current bore the flat-boat hither and thither. The wind had arisen, sending the flat in and out between the bushes ; now sweeping entirely over some clump of weeds, whose heads were above water ; anon, darting on with a rush, in danger of overturning.

All at once Jean raised her eyes, and a look of horror swept away the pallor which their peril had imprinted on her features. She caught her mother's arm.

“Mother,” she gasped, “God has forsaken us ! See ! there stands Gabriel Black !”

Mrs. Conway turned her head ; sure enough, upon the river-bank stood the villain who was bent upon their destruction, while at his side were the scowling, bearded faces of the vigilantes. But how could he reach them ? He had no boat, and the flat was nearly in the middle of the stream, sometimes diverging a little from the center.

“My God !” moaned Mrs. Conway, frantically, “we are lost ! for he will find some way to reach us, Jean ! He will never rest now until he has us in his power.”

Even as she spoke, Gabriel Black drew his rifle, and raising it to his shoulder, deliberately fired. He had no intention of

harming Jean or her mother ; but something entirely different instigated his movements. Just as he had anticipated, the report of the rifle startled the horses upon the flat. With a frantic bound they leaped wildly overboard. The flat careened like a crazy thing ; the impetus given it by the horses' leap nearly overturned it, and, in another moment, Jean and her mother were struggling in the water.

Like most Southern women reared in the country, the two could swim very well, and after the first shock was over, they struck out boldly for the shore ; but to Gabriel Black's intense chagrin, they turned their faces to the opposite side. "Better to drown than to fall into his hands," Jean said.

On they swam. The swift current tossed them about ; they battled energetically with the wild, rushing waters ; one moment they could see no escape—they were confident they must die ; but the next instant Jean struck out bravely for the shore again, with a fervent "*We shall be saved*" trembling on her lips. On—on ; God surely guided them, for past the eddies they went safely over the whirling waves, which hid deep, treacherous holes, and on—on—they are nearing the shore, Jean in advance. She turns to see that her mother is safe. Yes ! Mrs. Conway, though pale and terrified, is swimming onward, almost at the side of her intrepid daughter.

"Cheer up, mother dear !" cries the clear, girlish voice ; "we will outwit them yet."

On—on ; thank God, they are close to the bank now, and clutching at the weeds and shrubbery, which grow dense and rank to the water's edge, the two succeeded in pulling themselves to shore. One moment they stand, all dripping with water, and cast a look of defiance to the other side, where their hated pursuer stands, pallid and vengeful, glaring after them ; then they turn away to the swamp near by, and vanish in its depths.

Strange good fortune !—the horses, too, have swam in the same direction. Jean and her mother have not gone very far

when they hear the clatter of hoofs behind them, a loud whinny of delight, and the two sagacious creatures have overtaken them. Dripping with water, the saddles disarranged and soaked, yet the horses were, indeed, a welcome sight to the refugees, and it took but a moment to mount them and ride away.

In the meantime, the old negro ferryman had managed, after many ineffectual attempts, to scramble upon the flat-boat, and crouched there—a comical, but piteous spectacle.

Gabriel Black proceeded to cut down a pine sapling, and having removed the bark, he was in possession at last of a tolerable steering pole. Tossing off his coat, he sprang into the water, and grasping the pole closely, swam for the flat, which was really but a few rods away.

Once on board, Black succeeded in poling the craft across the stream, and tying it to an overhanging bough, he sprang on shore, found the path which the two women had taken, and dashed away on their track.

Jean and her mother traveled on at a rapid pace. They could reach New Orleans from a distant village on that side of the river, but by steamboat only; hence their reason for crossing the river to the railroad station. But they must “make a virtue of necessity;” and so, trying hard to feel hopeful and keep up their courage, they hurried their horses onward, never dreaming that the villain from whom they were flying was even then upon their track, determined to hunt them down as remorselessly as the sleuth-hound on the track of its victim. The time was drawing nigh when Gabriel Black’s love for Jean would turn into bitter hatred; such affection is prone to such transformation.

He made quick time on the track of the unfortunates, and, without stopping to rest, got over a long distance before the sun began to go down its golden ladder in the west. But at last the sun set, and Jean and her mother began to dread the coming twilight. The country through which they were passing

was not familiar to them, and almost uninhabited; but they knew that they could not lose their way, for they must journey due east to reach the village where lay the steamboat landing.

On they went. The sun was down now, and the gray shades of twilight began to creep slowly over all things.

“Mother,” said Jean, anxiously, “where shall we stay to-night? What shall we do?”

Her eyes fell upon a small cabin, a deserted shepherd hut. She rode around to the open door and glanced within. All was silent. There were no signs of life. Evidently the shepherd had driven his flock to some other pasture. They decided to spend the night in this place. Fortunately it was warm, and the bright sun’s rays had long ago dried their drenched garments. They alighted, and, taking the saddles from their horses, they fastened them to a neighboring tree, leaving them room to graze, and then they entered the hut. It contained one room without windows. There was no lock to the door, only a huge wooden socket, through which a bar of wood had been passed to serve the purpose of a bolt. They seated themselves upon a rude bench which stood near the mud fire-place, their arms about each other, when Jean glanced up, and saw the ugly face of Gabriel Black peering in at the door, which had been left open to admit the air. With a cry of horror, Jean sprang to her feet, and dashed the door to in his face; but, alas! there was no bolt, and only that frail plank intervened between the two women and their feared and hated enemy. He laughed aloud in derision, and pushed the door as though to open it. The two women exerted all their strength to resist. At that instant Mrs. Conway’s eyes fell upon a piece of wood on the opposite side of the room, which might serve the purpose of a bolt. She darted after it, but, alas! the wood was decayed, and broke at Mrs. Conway’s touch. Gabriel Black shook the door wildly. It began to give way. There was no help for it. Jean thrust one arm through the huge socket, determined to keep the villain at bay, if it cost her her life!

CHAPTER IX.

HAUNTED.

“I want my wife!”

It was the voice of Gabriel Black. All the softness and silkiness had gone out of it now, and it was harsh and commanding.

“*Gabriel Black, beware!*”

The ghostly, sepulchral voice seemed to proceed from the forest near.

Black started, and grew deathly pale, and trembled so violently that he could scarcely stand.

It was the same voice that he had heard before in the pine woods, on the opposite side of the river. He pushed back his damp hair from his cold brow.

“I begin to feel that I am haunted,” he muttered, wildly. “This is not the first time that I have heard that voice. *Can it be——*”

He hesitated, and said no more, but his face grew slowly paler, his eyes were dilated with horror, and he looked like a man bereft of sense and reason.

“Go back, Gabriel Black!” cried the voice again. “Dare to harm one hair of that poor girl’s head, and you will be punished!”

Black was very superstitious, and believed firmly in the supernatural. He sank upon the ground outside the door of the hut, and cowered there. But the devils which raged within his wicked heart were only quieted for a time, not silenced forever, and ere long the old mocking light came back to his black eyes, and he rose to his feet.

“Let me in, Mrs. Conway,” he commanded. “I have something to propose to you—an arrangement which will end this contention, and bridge these difficulties.”

"There is no possibility of your doing that, Gabriel Black." returned Mrs. Conway, contemptuously. "We want nothing to do with you. All we ask at your hands is to go away and leave us to ourselves. *Nothing* can alter this determination."

"Stay!" cried Gabriel Black, eagerly. "Suppose that I reveal to you the hiding-place of a great fortune! Ah! you laugh at the very idea, perhaps, but never mind; I know more than I shall tell, unless you promise that all shall be settled amicably. For I claim my wife. She is mine in the sight of the law. If you will consent, I will make you rich to the end of your days; and I will be kind to Jean, indeed I will."

"Leave us, Gabriel Black!" said Jean, haughtily, though her arm was paining her fearfully, and it seemed as though she could not remain in that position much longer. "You waste words on us. Nothing in the world would ever induce us to treat you other than scornfully. To me you are the veriest monster that ever walked the earth."

"You'll be sorry for that, my lady!" cried the brute, throwing the weight of his body upon the door.

"God!" cried Mrs. Conway, springing forward and seizing her fainting child in her arms.

The poor girl's right arm hung crushed and mangled at her side. The mother turned then and faced the villain who had done this dastardly deed.

"Out of my sight," she panted, "or I will choke the life from you!"

She laid the unconscious Jean upon the bench, and springing upon Black, she twisted her fingers about his throat, until he fairly gasped for mercy. For the second time that day the wretch was treated to a foretaste of what he so richly deserved; but Mrs. Conway's frail grasp relaxed.

The villain, almost purple in the face, sprang forward, and seizing the unconscious girl, bore her from the hut, placing her across one of the horses. He waited to saddle the other horses, then he ordered Mrs. Conway to mount.

“Where are you going to drag us?” demanded the poor woman, “in the night and in darkness?”

“That is my concern, madam!” he responded, harshly. “If you wish to accompany your daughter you may do so; otherwise, you may go your own way, and I will take my wife where I choose!”

Poor Mrs. Conway sprang upon the back of the other horse, and Black mounted the one upon which he had placed Jean, holding her carefully before him.

Turning the horses’ heads in an opposite direction, he started off, and Mrs. Conway followed. On they went for miles. It was nearly midnight when, half dead with fatigue, Mrs. Conway saw the dark shadow of a building loom up before them.

Here Black halted, and bore Jean inside, the agonized mother following closely in his wake. It was the old Red Tavern, that fearful den of iniquity, from which Philip Randall had just escaped.

* * * * *

The next night, or rather at twilight, a man might have been seen emerging from the forest, just below Lee’s Landing, a spade upon his shoulder, his gait rapid. It was Gabriel Black. On he went, over the broad expanse of land where the ravages of the fire-fiend were plainly visible. The conflagration had been extinguished, and the ground was burnt, and bare, and brown. Onward he came, occasionally glancing around to make sure of the locality. At length he paused before a spot where five gum trees were growing in a circle. His eyes lighted up with a wild gleam.

“The fire has not removed my marks, I see!” he exclaimed. “It was a fine stroke of policy, setting fire to the woods, and misled Mr. Philip beautifully. Ugh! he’s dead and out of the way by this time. The boys went back to finish the job, while I crossed the river. But I’ll hear their report to-morrow, and go and have a look at the carcass. Three cheers for Gabriel Black! I’ll have the buried treasure, or I’m mistaken.”

He stuck his spade into the ground, and stepping close to the gum trees, examined the trunk of each attentively. Yes, there was one marked with a cross. He drew a quick breath of rapture, and his eyes flashed greedily.

“Ah !” he cried, “I’m on the right track !”

He seized the spade, and began to dig in the ground at the foot of the tree that was marked with a cross. He had turned up two or three spadefuls of earth, when suddenly all grew dark before his eyes, he was in total gloom, while a voice hissed, rather than spoke, in his ear :

“Gabriel Black ! Dare to rob my innocent child, and you shall never know a moment’s peace ! I will hunt you down to your death, until you pray for the refuge of the grave ! You shall suffer, Gabriel Black, the punishment due to the dastard who robs the widow and orphan !”

He felt a stinging blow upon the head ; his temples seemed bound in iron bands ; he fell to the ground, and the night and darkness covered him.

CHAPTER X.

ONE NIGHT’S WORK.

“I never will ! So, there !”

Lady Lee swung her sun-hat upon her arm by its crimson ribbons, and sprang lightly over the narrow ditch which separated the lane from the great green pasture. Just inside the bars stood old Aunt Dinah, like a quaint figure carved in ebony, the yellow rays of the setting sun gilding her black features grotesquely, and resting in a halo upon her high towering, gaudy turban ; then glancing off and glinting over the shining milk buckets in her hand.

It was evening, and milking time at the Lee Place, and old Dinah had emerged from the mysterious precincts of the kitchen to attend to her usual duties in the pasture.

Moving slowly along at Lady's side, John Averill's tall figure loomed up in the dying sunlight. Grave he looked, and a trifle annoyed, his riding-whip ruthlessly switching off the heads of inoffensive flowers as he passed. Something was wrong with John ; that was plain to see. Whatever it was that had called him from home, in response to the negro's message, had not proved of a lively nature evidently.

His garments were mud-stained and splashed with water ; he had had a hard ride of it, any one could see that at a glance, but it was not that which caused him to frown so gloomily, and Lady knew that she was at the bottom of the whole mischief.

"I will never consent," she repeated, saucily, glancing into his clouded face ; "so it is useless to refer to the subject again, Mr. Averill. I have decided never to marry."

"Lady Lee !"

John's face was pale with repression passion as he halted abruptly in the path before her ; but suddenly checking his outburst, he assumed an indifference which he was far from feeling, and gave her as calm a glance as she had bestowed upon himself.

"I have only this to say," he went on slowly, "that you shall be my wife some day, Lady."

"Indeed I——" she began, but he interrupted her with a little gesture of command.

"I have said it," he went on, slowly and decidedly, "and you will find that my words will come true. And—so—you do not care for me, Lady?"

Her lovely dark eyes drooped before his earnest gaze.

"Not a bit !" she retorted, but her voice trembled a little as she spoke.

John smiled.

"All right," he returned. "But you will like me yet, Lady—nay, more, you will love me dearly ! and furthermore, I say to

you now that the next time marriage is spoken of between us two, *you* will be the one to break the ice, and——”

“Stop, John Averill!”

Lady's slender little figure was drawn up to its full height, her eyes sparkled with dangerous brightness, and her voice was full of indignation.

“How *dare* you speak to me like that?” she went on, “and at my own home, too! I shall tell my father to order you off the premises.”

“And I shall not go!” returned John, audaciously; “for, Lady, you know that I am right. But one thing I promise you—I will never again mention the subject of marriage to you; but I repeat what I have already said, the next reference to this disagreeable topic will proceed from yourself.”

A smile crossed the girl's red lips.

“You just wait for *that* time to come, John Averill,” she cried, saucily, “and I reckon you'll be old and gray!”

“Not a bit of it,” he answered, smilingly, “as you will live to discover. And now, Lady, I must see your father. I didn't come here to pass the precious time in quarreling. I have a mind to tell you what I *did* come for.”

He hesitated, glancing toward old Dinah; but the negress had called up Whitefoot, the foremost among the bovine group, and was busily engaged in the operation of milking.

“I *will* tell you,” continued John, in an undertone. “I received warning yesterday, Lady, just after I saw you, that the ‘vigilantes’ are on the war-path again; in other words, that detestable band of outlaw ruffians are engaged in carrying on their usual nefarious business—horse-stealing, etc. And I was informed yesterday evening that they are on their way to this place. Some of them have a grudge against your father, Lady—so I'm told—and they expect to be here to-night to run off your mules and horses. Flirt, especially, is ‘spotted’ for to-night's spoils.”

While John was speaking, Lady's face had grown very pale,

but she checked all outward semblance of fear, and as he concluded, she turned a brave, resolute little face upon her companion.

"We will be ready for them!" she answered, quietly. "You will do what you can to assist us, Mr. Averill?"

Her tone was one of certainty; evidently she had no doubt upon that score.

"Why, yes," returned John, carelessly. "I'd just as soon help you as anybody."

Lady's face flushed hotly, and she turned away. John's implied indifference had hurt her, as he intended it should, and the young man bit his lips to repress a smile of amused satisfaction.

"We had better go to the house and let papa know at once," went on Lady, after a short pause. "Bring your horse, Mr. Averill, if you please, and let Sam attend to him."

He led the horse along, and followed Lady's footsteps until the great, roomy old house was reached.

Sam, a diminutive negro, lounging on the grass-plot before the gallery, sprang up, and having executed his best bow, led John's horse away to the stable, while the young man accompanied Lady into the house.

It was a large country-house, with an ample hall running through the center, and on each side large rooms, with doors and windows admitting plenty of sunlight and pure, fresh air, and the scent of innumerable flowers. Mr. and Mrs. Lee were sitting in the parlor, a large, pleasant apartment, the floor covered with light matting, and the furniture much finer than that which one was apt to meet in that remote region, including a piano, guitar, and violin, upon all which instruments Lady was proficient.

The old people greeted John with marked cordiality, while Lady ran off up stairs to change her dress, as she had but just returned from a ramble in the pine woods, and while she was absent from the room, John explained to old Mr. Lee the

dangerous situation, and the necessity for being prepared for an emergency.

"There's not the slightest doubt that they will attack you, Mr. Lee," said John; "they do not like you anyway, and then you have some good horseflesh, and they mean to get possession of it. I had my information straight from Coons, the darkey. He overheard some of the vigilantes planning the attack. Coons is grateful to me, for I saved his life when he fell into the river once, you remember, so he took pains to come and inform me. I rode off at once; but I thought best to go right on to the village for a good supply of ammunition, and I was delayed there all night by an accident; that explains my late appearance here."

"I wonder who these vigilantes are," remarked Mr. Lee, nervously. "Have you any idea?"

"No. I would give anything in the world to know," replied the young man. "Their movements are certainly directed by some intelligent person; but they commit their depredations always masked, and it's mighty hard to guess at their identity."

"I shall never forget you, Averill," cried the old man, grasping John's hand firmly, for your kindness in coming to my assistance!"

"Pooh! that's nothing!" returned John—"only a neighborly action. And now, Mr. Lee, to business. How are you off for weapons? We must be prepared for a lively time!"

Mr. Lee looked serious.

"Well," he began, thoughtfully—"let me see. "There's the big shot-gun——"

"Just the thing!" interrupted John, gayly.

"And then," continued his host, "I have a Colt's navy revolver—a six-shooter—can carry as far as the shot-gun, nearly."

"Good!" cried John.

“And then there’s the old carbine,” Mr. Lee added, “and Lady’s rifle.”

“Can she use it?”

The old man laughed until the tears stood in his dark eyes.

“You’d better believe she can!” he exclaimed, merrily.

“Why, Jack, did you never see our Adelaide shoot? I’ve known her to bring down forty pigeons at a shot, and she’s ‘got her hand in’ on quail and snipe—no end of birds—on the wing, too!” the old man added, gleefully.

“Humph!” Well, perhaps she will have occasion to try her hand at larger game before to-morrow’s sun rises. I’d give something to be able to knock over a few of these vigilantes myself; then there would be a chance to find out the leader of them and string him up at the end of a piece of rope. We are not safe while such creatures are at large; and not only our lives, but our property is in danger.”

“We will do all we can,” returned the old man, gravely. “Come out and have some supper now. We need to fortify ourselves. Then for our plan of defense!”

“Or offense,” suggested John, “for I’m determined to try to get at the first of these vigilantes!”

He followed his host into the spacious dining-room, where Lady, radiant in a fresh white dress, with scarlet ribbons, was fluttering about, arranging the supper-table with her own hands.

After the meal was over, they returned to the parlor, and the fire-arms were brought out for general inspection. John produced his own trusty rifle and the store of ammunition. The weapons were carefully loaded, and all was prepared.

In those days there were no more laws in that remote region than—well, than there are now!—no reliable authority to which to appeal for protection. Then, as now, the country was wild and lawless. When men wished to punish criminals, they took justice into their own hands; quick work was made of it, and little mercy shown.

The preparations were made with expedition. Two sturdy negroes, upon whom they could depend, were called in from their cabins, their duties pointed out to them, and weapons placed in their hands. Then they all repaired to the barn, to be ready for the expected horse-thieves, and Mrs. Lee and Lady would not hear to being left behind, first locking and fastening the house securely, and loosing the two great blood-hounds upon the porch.

It was a lovely night. The moon had arisen, and its silvery beams illumined everything around. Lady knelt upon a heap of fragrant hay, and applied her sharp eyes to a crevice in the planks of the building. All at once the hoarse growls of the hounds indicated the approach of some enemy, and soon a party of horsemen rode around in front of the barn, while one, evidently the leader, in a cautious tone, commanded the party to *halt*. Then followed the sound of subdued voices, and then the fastenings of the stable door rattled a trifle, the door swung softly open, and a man appeared on the threshold. But he never entered, for at that moment John Averill, kneeling in the loft above, unseen and unsuspected, leveled his rifle and fired. A terrible volley of oaths and curses followed, and the vigilantes, in a body, rushed into the barn. Tall and powerful, their faces concealed by crape masks, they were a formidable looking set. A general *melee* took place; some shots were fired, half a dozen vigilantes hurt badly, but, as yet, the leader was untouched.

He was bent on getting possession of Flirt. The practiced eye of the fiend in human form had taken in all the fine points of the mare, and long ago he had determined to possess it. In the midst of the noise and confusion—the firing, shrieking, oaths, and curses—Gabriel Black contrived to slip around outside the barn, and loosen a couple of planks in the side of the building next to Flirt's stall. Softly he threw a bridle over her head, and succeeded in fastening it. Then, still unobserved, he led the horse through the opening. At that moment, from above, Lady's eyes fell upon the ruffian, and, like a flash of

lightning, she realized the situation. Now, Lady loved her horse better than anything else in the world, except—well, there was one exception. The thought of losing the beautiful creature almost deprived her of her senses. Pausing not to reflect, she opened the wooden shutter of the loft where she stood, directly above the opening through which Black had led the horse.

“Flirt!” called Adelaide, softly.

The sagacious animal paused, and glanced upward.

Snatching a revolver from the hay, where some one had dropped it, Lady sprang through the open window. It was only four or five feet above the back of the horse—the girl had performed the feat once before in jest—and she alighted square upon Flirt’s back.

The captain of the vigilantes drew back in amazement at the unexpected apparition, while Lady caught the bridle in one hand, and, drawing the revolver, turned it full upon the ruffian’s face.

“Dare to touch me, or my horse,” she panted, and I’ll blow your brains out!”

So complete was the villain’s astonishment, that he was unable to utter a word—to make a movement—but stood staring through his mask at the intrepid girl.

A sudden suspicion entered Lady’s heart. Always the creature of impulse, she slipped the revolver into her bridle hand, and, turning suddenly, snatched the mask from the face of the vigilante.

“Ah, Gabriel Black!” she exclaimed, quietly, “I began to suspect that you had a hand in this.”

With a maddened execration, he dashed forward to drag her from the back of the horse; but Flirt could bear no more. With a wild snort the frightened animal flew off, like an arrow from a bow, bearing her young mistress with her.

Infuriated at his failure, Black hastened around to the front of the building.

“Vigilantes!” he shouted, wildly, “we have been duped and fooled—by a woman—and the best horse is gone! Turn the others out of the stable. We will burn the barn down, and end these devils’ lives!”

They went to work with fiendish alacrity. Up in the loft, John Averill had heard the captain’s command, and he called the old couple to his post of observation, while the frightened darkeys crouched near in terror.

“Quick!” cried John; “they’re going to burn us out!”

“Like rabbits in a hollow tree, sah!” interrupted one of the frightened negroes.

“Where’s Lady?” demanded John, suddenly, casting startled glances around the barn.

“Gone, sah!” cried the negro, his teeth chattering with fear. “She done jump out de window, and flewed away—on her own hoss, sah!”

John Averill sprang forward, and shook the man until his teeth chattered like castanets.

“What do you mean?” groaned Averill, stopping at last to take breath. “Where is Miss Adelaide, I say?”

“’Fore God, Marse Averull,” groaned the terrified voice, “I done seed her wid dese yere eyes! Whew! Gor a mighty! we’s gone up now—suah!”

For a great puff of smoke had arisen, followed by the crackling and snapping of burning wood. John saw that Lady was indeed gone, and, wild with horror and alarm, he turned to the stairs which led below, followed by Mr. and Mrs. Lee and the negroes.

“My God!” muttered John, brokenly, “there’s a black night’s work going on. I would——”

He paused, aghast, at the outer door. *The vigilantes had gone!* vanished like the fantasia of a dream, taking with them the remaining horses, and leaving the barn wrapped from top to bottom in seething flames.

“Cowards!” hissed John Averill, setting his teeth hard together; “I’ll have revenge for this, if I lay my own life down to gain it!”

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE OLD RED TAVERN.

When Jean opened her eyes, she was in a strange apartment. A tallow candle burning upon a rickety table cast a faint, sickly light throughout the room, and disclosed a square, half-furnished chamber—the table aforesaid, two chairs, and the bed upon which Jean was lying, being the sum total of its contents. But her mother’s kind face met the girl’s frightened eyes as she came back to the world again, and that atoned for all discomfort.

Jean’s arm pained her frightfully. It had been dressed already by old Bill Corney himself, who had made his appearance during Jean’s insensibility, and announced his intention of attending to the wounds. Mrs. Conway knew him by reputation, and that he was reputed to be a good surgeon, in his rude and uncouth way. He knew the virtue of many healing plants and herbs which grow in the woods right in our pathway; yet we depend upon physicians and drug stores for aid, when, but for our own ignorance, we might dispense with such, for Nature supplies us with her own sovereign remedies, only we are too blind to read her handwriting aright.

As I have said, Corney had attended to Jean’s injury, and applied a healing lotion, which quieted the patient, and reduced the inflammatory symptoms; and now Jean was conscious once more.

“Where are we, mother?” she queried, trying to sit up.

“Lie still, dear,” returned Mrs. Conway, gently. “I do

not know where we are, Jean. Old Corney has been here and dressed your arm, and so—and——”

She paused abruptly. Jean's face had grown deadly white, and her eyes were dilated with horror unutterable.

“You—you—don't think that we can be at the old Red Tavern—do you, mother?” she cried.

For the notoriety which that dreadful place had gained within the past few years had reached their ears, and they shrank in terror from the very suspicion.

“I do not know, Jean,” replied her mother, doubtfully, sitting down upon the bed, and passing her arm about the frightened girl. “We will try not to think so, anyway.”

“Mother!”—Jean's voice was low and full of alarm—“I believe I should die if I were sure that we are in that dreadful place! We have heard such fearful stories of what has transpired within its walls! There was the old peddler—you remember, mother!—who was known to have entered the old Red Tavern, with his pack, but was never seen afterward. Then, there was poor Mr. Lanier, who was murdered there in cold blood. I have heard that the spirit of the old peddler haunts the place. I—I—— Mother, what is that?”

For the sound of a groan had fallen upon their ears, distinct and hollow. Again it was repeated.

“Who's there?” demanded Mrs. Conway, aroused from her usual gentle passiveness by her fear of the effect of all this upon poor Jean.

“A friend,” the voice responded.

“Friend!” repeated Mrs. Conway, scornfully. “We have none!”

“I am your friend,” reiterated the voice, “and I warn you to escape from this place as soon as possible, or you will never leave it alive!”

Mrs. Conway with difficulty restrained her horror from Jean's observation.

"We do not *know* where we are," she began, and the voice interrupted her in a solem cadence :

"The old Red Tavern !"

Jean shrieked aloud.

Mrs. Conway drew the golden head down upon her motherly breast, and kissed and soothed her into quiet.

"We need all our strength, dear," she whispered, "that we may be able to escape."

"Escape !" repeated Jean, bitterly. "Did you ever know any one to escape from Gabriel Black, or the old Red Tavern ?"

Mrs. Conway sighed.

"God will help us, my daughter !" she responded, solemnly. "He never forsakes those that trust in Him."

Then she gave Jean some quieting medicine, and still holding the girl's head, she sat there while the white lids drooped over the pansy blue eyes, and Jean's slow and regular breathing told her mother that she slept.

Then Mrs. Conway laid the golden head upon the pillow, and sat down beside the bed. Everything was unearthly silent ; a heavy, oppressive stillness, broken by no sound save a "death-watch" ticking in the wall, and an occasional chirp of a cricket in the fire-place near by. Moved by a sudden impulse, Mrs. Conway arose and approached the wall of the room near her. Some instinct told her that the walls were padded, to prevent the penetration of sounds from without. She had seen such walls before, and upon examination she found that her suspicions were correct. Whence had that voice proceeded, then ? Not from an adjoining room, for the sound could not penetrate. The room contained one window ; the sash had been removed, and a wooden shutter substituted, fastened on the outside.

The chamber was without means of ventilation, and Mrs. Conway, accustomed as she was to the pure, fresh air of the pine woods, felt oppressed and full of lassitude already.

How long must they remain there ? For what purpose were

they imprisoned? The door double-locked on the outside—she knew by the sounds produced by fastening it when old Corney had left them. He had brought food and drink, and left it on the table. Mrs. Conway determined that when Jean should awake, they must partake of food, that they might have strength to escape, for she was bound to escape, if it lay within the range of human possibility.

The time slipped by, and at last Jean awoke.

“Mother,” she said, softly, “I have been dreaming of Philip. I dreamed that he was here in this very room.”

She sat up as she spoke, and glanced around.

“Look!” she cried, suddenly. “What—what is that?”

Upon the floor, in a dusty corner, where it had rolled evidently, was a small, shining object. Mrs. Conway hastened to pick it up. Jean’s face grew perfectly white, and she groaned in horror as she clutched it frantically. It was a small gold sleeve-button, set with pearls, and it had belonged to Philip Randall. Yes, there were his initials on the back of the button. Sick and faint with horror, the two women sat gazing into each other’s faces. Suddenly Jean turned her eyes toward the floor, and, grasping her mother’s hand, she screamed aloud:

“See, mother!” she cried, pointing with one finger to the bare floor of the room. “Great Heaven! Philip Randall has been in this place—in this very room—and God help us! they have murdered him!”

And Mrs. Conway looking in the direction indicated by Jean’s trembling fingers, saw, with a wild thrill of horror, two great dark stains upon the bare floor beside the bed—the unmistakable, ineffaceable stains of human blood!

CHAPTER XII.

DEAD !

On dashed Flirt, the lithe young rider erect upon the bare back of the fleet creature. It was not the first ride that Lady had ever taken without a saddle, but she began to imagine that it was destined to be her last, for Flirt fairly flew along, like a wild thing, and Lady could no more have controlled the horse in its present temper than she could have controlled the wind. She gave up at length, and allowed Flirt the rein, trusting to her sagacity not to break her own neck.

Lady had found out now, without a doubt, who was the leader of the vigilantes, and her heart sank as she recollected her own rash deed, for she was well aware that the villain would never rest until he had had his revenge. She was certain that, unless she could keep out of his way in some manner, he would take her life ; for, of course, it would be her duty to reveal his true character to the people of the surrounding country ; and, once revealed, Gabriel Black's life was not worth a rye straw. If she could only keep out of his clutches ! But she was all alone—a frail, defenseless woman. How could she succeed ?

On, on dashed Flirt. For hours they rode as mad a race as that of the famous Tam O'Shanter. Even in her perilous position, Lady could not refrain from smiling at the comparison.

“It only needs the witches !” she exclaimed, half aloud, and laughing a merry little ringing laugh as Flirt tore on—through a “branch”—and over the waters like a winged creature, safe to the other side. Riding without a saddle, with no wrap, or even a hat on her head, Lady's position was not an enviable one ; but she had risked her own life to save her beloved horse, and she must accept the consequences. On they went. The

moon, so bright and clear, would shine all night, Lady knew, and she felt no terror.

At last, tired out, Flirt began to slacken her speed. And so the gray mists which precede the dawn began to appear in the east; then a pearly streak, followed later by crimson and golden luster; and, at length, the god of day arose in all his glory. By this time Flirt was pretty well tired out, and was going on at an ordinary pace.

Lady rubbed her eyes and glanced about her uneasily. They had not passed a habitation in all that long, lonely night ride, and now it was with a feeling of intense thankfulness that she caught sight of a column of dark smoke, and knew that some dwelling was nigh. She was so fatigued, so stiff and lame from her fearful ride, that she kept herself from fainting with difficulty. And so, coming around a clump of pines, she came in sight of a log-cabin. A rough-looking man lounged before the door, smoking as though his life depended upon it; inside, Lady caught a glimpse of a frowzy-headed woman, busily engaged in cooking breakfast over a huge lightwood fire in the mud fire-place, and several half-clad children swarmed about, yelling and quarreling. Flirt stood still beside the low rail fence and before the house, where two or three long, lean porkers were industriously grubbing and squealing, and a yoke of oxen were patiently grazing. Lady essayed to speak, but her voice would not obey her, and she sat helpless on Flirt's back, while the man arose, and, with his hands in his pockets, puffing away at his corn-cob pipe, slowly approached her. With a mighty effort, Lady found her voice.

"May I go in and rest awhile, sir, if you please?" she asked, as meek as a lamb.

"Which?"

The man's face expressed intense astonishment; he leaned against the fence and gazed with such undisguised wonder at the unexpected apparition, that his pipe fell from his mouth, and was captured at once by one of the youngsters aforesaid.

"I am very tired," continued Lady, "and I'd like to rest a bit."

"Tired? By craminy, I'sh think so!"

His words, and the sharp looks directed at her attire and Flirt's bare back, spoke volumes.

"Help me down, please!" cried Lady, impatiently.

The man, awed by her manner, obeyed, and the poor girl sank upon the ground at his feet.

"Here, you, Mariar!" shouted the man, raising his voice to a pitch which brought his wife to the door at once. "By craminy! the gal's fainted, or dead, or suthin'! Come here, I say!"

"Mariar" hastened to the fore, and they carried poor Lady into the house; and after a time she was resuscitated.

Having drank a cup of black coffee, she begged permission to remain a day or two, until she would be able to travel, requesting the man to ride to her father's and acquaint him with her whereabouts. To all this the man agreed, and at length set out for the Lee Place, which Lady found, to her consternation, was more than twenty miles away.

* * * * *

Meantime at the Lee Place all was excitement, alarm, anguish, over Lady's unknown fate. The days came and went; the poor girl had been missing about a week, when one morning Flirt came dashing into the barn-yard, riderless and flecked with foam. The poor old father wound his arms about the neck of the horse and wept tears of agony. John Averill, poor heart-broken John, had never ceased to search for Lady, night nor day, since her strange disappearance. He was a witness to this heart-rending scene, and the first impression which came to him was that Lady was drowned; for Flirt would not desert her willingly. Even while they were discussing the fearful possibility, the barking of the hounds announced an arrival, and the man whom Lady had sent appeared. His story seemed very probable,

and the poor old father, accompanied by John Averill, set out at once to return with the stranger to his house.

It was nearly night when they started, and traveling all night, they arrived at the cabin by sunrise. Springing from their horses, they followed their guide to the door.

“Mariar” put in an appearance immediately.

“Ye’ve come arter the gal, I expect?” she began, in her shrill voice, smoothing down her blue check apron as she spoke. “Wal, I’m mighty sorry; reckon as how ye’ll take it right hard, but you see that thar trip a-horseback was too much for her. She had ‘the fever’ on her when she got here, and—and—she didn’t live three days! We couldn’t keep the body, ’twas too warm, ye know, and so she’s out thar!”

The woman pointed with her skinny hand to a low, narrow mound under a great magnolia near by. Old Mr. Lee sank down beside it without a word. John Averill, white, and stern, and uncompromising, came and stood beside it. He had no tears or sobs.

“By this little grave,” he said, in a low, tense voice, and raising one hand heavenward as he spoke, “I repeat my oath of vengeance! So help me, Heaven, I will have the life of the fiend that is responsible for this deed!”

There was a slight rustling in the bushes near, and John Averill sprang forward like one bereft of his senses.

CHAPTER XIII.

POOR LADY!

When Gabriel Black returned to his senses, after the blow which he had received while attempting to rob the widow and orphan, he was lying upon the grass, not far from the scene of his interrupted labor, and the pale, calm moon looked down upon him.

He sat up and glared fiercely about, while a volley of imprecations burst from his lips. He was stiff and sore from the effects of the blow, and lying upon the ground in the damp, heavy night dews had not improved his temper; but, after several ineffectual efforts, he was able to stagger to his feet, and walk slowly and painfully.

Gabriel Black was playing a desperate game. His intention was to gain possession of the buried treasure, hoping to tempt Jean to be reconciled to her fate, and not dreaming that any woman could resist the golden lure which he would offer. If, however, the poor girl could not be won by gold, why, the treasure would be in his possession all the same, and the Conways, not knowing of its existence, would of course be none the wiser. And with such immense wealth in his keeping, Black would be willing to go away and trouble Jean no more, for to him *money* was the one great object in existence. Alas! it is too frequently the sole aim in life to many human beings.

But—though he did not know it—had Jean been aware that she was the lawful heiress to all this wealth supposed to be hidden away under the marked gum tree, she would willingly have given it all to Gabriel Black if she might thus buy freedom from her hateful bonds and be relieved from his persecution. But Black never dreamed the truth; he measured every one else by his own standard, and did not reflect that a pure, true woman prefers her own self-respect to all the gold of the universe.

He saw that the way to the buried treasure lay through unpleasant paths. Some one must know all; whoever was his unseen assailant must have been in possession of the secret. He resolved to give up the attempt for to-night, and striking into a narrow, almost imperceptible foot-path, he wandered on through the forest, his brain teeming with plots for future villainy. It was nearly sunrise when, passing through an opening in the pines, he encountered the man whom poor Lady had sent to her father with the tidings of her whereabouts. As the

man's eyes fell upon Black, he checked his horse and awaited his approach. A low and earnest conversation ensued, and then the man turned his horse's head and went back on a gallop to his home.

Arrived there, he caught a glimpse of "Mariar" and beckoned her aside. No one had seen him return, and poor Lady, within the house, lying on the patchwork-covered bed, never dreamed of the villainy which was taking place, the plot of which the man was hurriedly repeating for "Mariar's" instruction and edification.

"Good luck for us!" cried the woman, at the first pause in his hurried intelligence. "We didn't put a hoss shoe over *our* door for nothin'. And you're sure that Black'll pay the hard cash, is you, Bob? Bet you two bits he don't do it!"

"Wal," responded Bob, shaking his grizzly head with slow emphasis, "he'd better, if he wants to keep a hull skin! That's all *I've* got to say about it. I'm *sho'*, Mariar, that he'll keep his word; and—a hundred dollars ain't picked off every gall-berry bush that grows in the openin'."

"Reckon *not!*" chuckled the woman; "and the gal hain't no airthly use to us. We mought as well take up with Black's offer, and do as he axes us. *I'm* agreeable, Bob, if *you* is."

The man nodded laconically, and so poor Lady's fate was sealed.

* * * * *

It was several days later when Bob finally mounted his horse and started for the Lee Place. But, in the interim, strange occurrences had taken place. Lady waited her father's arrival with impatience, but he did not come; neither did Bob put in an appearance, for, of course, she believed implicitly that he had gone, as represented, to her father's.

One day "Mariar" came into the back room, where Lady was sitting alone, bringing with her a cup of coffee.

"Ye'd better take a cup o' black coffee, miss," she began,

persuasively, "and see if it don't strengthen you. Thar ain't nothin' like black coffee for puttin' life into a weak frame."

And Lady, not wishing to appear ungrateful or indifferent to the woman's kindness, drank the coffee, never dreaming of the strong narcotic which had been infused into it. In a few moments her head fell back, her eyes closed, and she was in a profound, dreamless, unnatural slumber. As soon as her heavy breathing assured the woman that the drug had taken effect, she hurried to the outer door of the cabin and beckoned Bob to enter. He obeyed the summons at once, and, wrapping a heavy shawl around Lady's unconscious form, he bore her out of the house, and, getting upon his horse, which stood ready saddled, he rode off with Lady in his arms. Down the river he went, for three or four miles, perhaps, coming to a halt, after a time, on the river-bank. Here he dismounted, and bore the still unconscious girl to the water's edge, where a small canoe was fastened by a chain to an overhanging cypress. The ruffian proceeded to place the poor girl in the boat, and, leaning far over the water, he gave the tiny craft a smart push, which sent it away out into the middle of the stream. He stood for a few moments, exulting in the success of his diabolical undertaking.

"One hundred dollars cl'ar gain!" he muttered, eagerly. "Twould a took a heap o' wharf timber to brung me that, and here I've gone and arned it in two hours' work! Black's a right smart fellow. I'd do anything for *him*!"

He mounted his horse and rode away through the dim, green forest, and that same evening he started for the Lee Place.

In the meantime "Mariar" had worked long and earnestly, preparing the grave which was intended to deceive Lady's parents and friends, and, by forcing them to believe that she was dead, would throw them off the track, and her fate would never be known.

Gabriel Black had not possessed sufficient courage to kill the poor girl outright; yet, if she lived and was allowed to return

to her friends, the villain knew just how much his own life would be worth.

Bob had refused outright to take Lady's life, but the prospect of a hundred dollars for a "job," such as he had just committed, was too much for that gentleman's avarice. Therefore he had consented, and had necessarily carried it out.

The little canoe, with its precious freight, drifted slowly down the winding stream, now gliding in among a clump of bushes and water-plants, anon drifting on with the swift current—on, on, for many miles. But, One guided it, and watched over it, and directed its course. "Lo! the wicked shall not always prosper."

And, at last, Lady opened her great dark eyes, and gazed around her on the fair, sunshiny scene. Consternation and alarm filled her heart. Where was she?

What had happened? All around her was a wide waste of waters. She had drifted down the river to its mouth, and was now all alone on the pathless waters of Lake Pontchartrain—overhead the blue, smiling sky, the water rising and falling in huge foam-crested waves all about the frail craft, which glided onward as though guided by some unseen hand.

Lady sat up, and endeavored to collect her scattered senses. Intuitively she seemed to grasp the truth—the fearful reality. She had been sent adrift upon the trackless waters by some enemy, some fiendish creature, who was even now exulting in her certain destruction.

But Lady's indomitable spirit was not crushed, even under the weight of the calamities by which she was overwhelmed.

"Whoever has done this thing," she cried aloud, glancing fearfully about her, "is a dastardly coward! It would have been more merciful to have put an end to my existence at once!"

The lake seemed deserted by all vessels. In those days there was not as much travel upon Lake Pontchartrain as

at the present time, and Lady drifted on for hours without once meeting any sign of life, or any vessel.

“I’m going to seek my fortune, like the maidens in the fairy tales!” she laughed.

She seized the paddle which lay in the bottom of the boat—forgotten by Bob—and began to use it vigorously. She thoroughly understood the art of paddling a boat, and the little canoe shot onward over the great foamy waves.

At last night came on, dreary and cloudy, and the darkness fell over all things, and closed like a gloomy curtain around her. The paddle was useless now, and she drifted slowly onward to her fate. Poor Lady!

CHAPTER XIV.

DEATH—FOR CERTAIN.

What John Averill saw through the thicket of pines and low shrubs growing around the grove which he believed held his darling, was sufficient to startle even the strongest nerves. It was a face—a dead, white, unearthly-looking face, which peered out from behind a wide-spreading pine tree—the great dark eyes fixed full upon John’s startled countenance, while one white attenuated hand beckoned him cautiously.

Something warned the young man to keep his own counsel; he made no sign that he had observed the secret signal, and waited patiently for Mr. Lee to leave the spot. He succeeded in inducing the old man to enter the cabin for a little needful rest, and saying that he would soon return, he hurried away.

Striking a path which led through the bushes, John fairly flew, so intense was his desire to reach the spot where he had seen that white, despairing face. But *there was no one there!*

For an instant he paused aghast, fairly overcome by dis-

appointment and chagrin. Something impelled him onward. He determined to know the meaning of that hasty and secret summons. He searched among the bushes; he beat all about; he even whistled, cautiously and softly, as a signal that he had returned; but there was no response—no sign of a living presence, only—— What was that in the path, directly in front of him? He stooped to examine. It was a foot-print, a tiny foot-print, fresh and plain, evidently recently made in the moist, damp earth at his feet.

He clenched his hands together wildly. Was it Lady's foot-print upon which he was gazing?

Glancing about in search of possible clues, his gaze fell upon a small, white object farther on in the forest. He sprang forward, and picked it up. It was a piece of paper, upon which had been hastily scrawled, in a bold, legible hand, these words :

“JOHN AVERILL :

“Philip Randall was once a friend of yours ; do you know where he is now? He has fallen into the hands of his worst enemies—even the vigilantes. Their leader is a fiend, and upon his head you must visit the death of the poor girl whom you come to seek. Rescue Philip Randall, and all the rest will be clear.”

There was no name, no date ; but it was evident that the writer knew him, and all his private affairs. John drew a long breath as he endeavored earnestly to make out who the mysterious writer could be. But it was all of no avail ; he could not imagine.

“The leader of the vigilantes !” repeated John, grimly. “The writer of this evidently believes that I am acquainted with that gentleman. My God ! if I only knew who he is, I would ask no more ; for, as Heaven hears me, I would have his worthless life ! I have sworn it ; for I have had no doubt of his agency in this terrible affair, and this communication ‘makes assurance doubly sure.’”

He paused and stood for a time buried in deep reflection.

"Poor Philip!" he exclaimed, at length. "Poor, good-hearted, noble, upright Phil Randall! I would give something to know his fate. If I could rescue him I would do it gladly; but I know nothing of his whereabouts. Until now I had believed him at his home in New Orleans. Well, I can only keep my eyes open and do my level best. Perhaps I may unravel this mystery yet."

He hurried back to the cabin to the poor old heart-broken man, and they mounted their horses and rode away slowly, their hearts crushed by the awful, sudden blow which had fallen so unexpectedly.

Hardly had John left the spot where he had heard the strange voice and discovered the warning letter, when Bob arose from his hiding-place behind a huge oak, and slouched away.

"Reckon I'll keep an eye on you, my fine young fellow!" he muttered to himself. "Like as not my one hundred will swell to a bigger pile. Bob's heered the young chap's secret; and, dog gone me, if I ain't just the cove to give it away!"

He slunk into the rude stable, mounted his horse, and rode off into the woods. John and Mr. Lee had already taken their departure. Bob easily found their fresh trail, and struck into it. It was getting dark when at last he rode up within sight of the two, who were riding slowly abreast. Bob halted at a safe distance behind, and drawing a crape mask from his pocket, he tied it on quickly, effectually concealing his identity; then he rode along briskly, and drew rein at John Averill's side.

"*Good* evening, gentlemen!" he began, in a disguised tone. "I'd be obliged to you if you'll please to hand over any money or other waluables you may happen to have on ye!"

John whirled around suddenly on his horse, and confronted the robber.

"Who are you?" he cried, in a clear, ringing voice. "I demand to know!"

"A vigilante!" returned the robber, presenting a revolver;

“and you’d better give me what I ask for, or I’ll send you both to kingdom come!”

John and Mr. Lee were unarmed. In the excitement of their journey, and their anxiety to rescue Lady as quickly as possible, the thought of weapons of defense had not entered their minds. John remembered it now, when it was too late, with a bitter pang of regret. But if he *must* die, he would die game.

With a sudden, back-handed stroke, so unexpected as to thoroughly demoralize the vigilante, John knocked the weapon from the robber’s hand. It landed in a clump of live oaks, several rods distant. John sprang from his horse then, and seizing the ruffian, dragged him from his own horse to the ground.

Mr. Lee, intuitively understanding what would be required of him, dismounted, and catching the horse of the vigilante, hastily stripped its bridle off, and while John held the man’s arms behind his back, Mr. Lee bound them firmly. Then, turning suddenly, he tore the mask from the villain’s face. It was Bob, the man whose house they had just left. For an instant John recoiled in horror.

“You villain!” he shouted, angrily; “you fiend! So *you* are a vigilante, too, are you? Now I begin to doubt the truth of your story about Miss Lee.”

“It’s all true—every word of it!” affirmed Bob, doggedly. “But I’m bound to have revenge for this! When I git home, I’ll dig up the body and toss it into the river for the alligators and buzzards to feast on!”

With a groan of agony and horror too deep for expression, the young man recoiled. He clenched his hand as though to strike the ruffian; but he remembered that Bob was bound and helpless in his hands, and John Averill was too much of a man to strike even a brute when it was down. Bob scrambled to his feet.

“Ontie my hands !” he shouted, “and fight if ye want to. I’m your man !”

John drew back with a haughty gesture.

“No,” he said, sternly. “I only fight my equals. Get up on your horse,” he commanded. “There, I will help you. Come, Mr. Lee ; let us return to this creature’s cabin. I am going to take poor Lady from that grave at once. We will not wait, as we had intended, until we had broken the news to her mother.”

They remounted, and, with Bob still bound tightly, turned their horses’ heads. The robber’s horse followed, trotting briskly behind them, and so they rode slowly back to the vigilante’s cabin.

* * * * *

We left Philip Randall riding away after his miraculous escape from hanging. He did not pause to look for the road ; he flew on through the forest, wild with a hope of ultimately escaping, and never dreaming how near Jean was to him, and how fearful was her own peril.

On he dashed madly through the pines. There was a sudden turn in the narrow bridle-path which he was trying to follow ; and, ere he was aware of it, he was in the midst of a party of horsemen, well armed, and their faces concealed by masks.

“God help me !” groaned Philip, setting his teeth hard together, and spurring his horse wildly forward. They rode up, and closed around him in a moment.

“Who are you ?” he demanded.

“*Vigilantes !*”

They sprang upon him and dragged him from his horse, which some one led quickly away.

“God help me !” repeated Philip. “It is death for certain this time.”

CHAPTER XV.

AN UNSEEN FRIEND.

For a long time poor Jean wept and moaned in bitter agony, and her mother vainly essayed to comfort her. Philip was dead! That was the burden of her sorrow. Dead—foully murdered; she felt certain of it. How came that sleeve-button in the little room at the Red Tavern, unless Philip had really been there? And the blood-stains upon the floor—fresh, frightful stains. The very recollection of them brought on deeper paroxysms of grief; and Mrs. Conway began to fear for Jean's reason. At last she appealed to the girl's sense of honor, her pride and self-respect.

“Jean,” she said, firmly. “do you forget that Philip Randall is a married man? Even were *you* free”—a shudder of horror passed over Jean's slender frame—“for notwithstanding the dreadful bonds with which you are chained, my child, they are nevertheless firm, and you *are* bound. Even were it otherwise, Philip is not at liberty to care for you, and he has never told you that he loved you, Jean.”

It was when the poor girl's grief was at its height that Mrs. Conway, chancing to turn away from the bed where Jean was lying, saw, to her surprise, something written on the white wall of the room. Greatly alarmed at her strange discovery—for she knew that it had not been there before, and, of course, no one had entered the room without her knowledge—she determined to find out, if possible, what it all meant.

Taking the candle, she hastened to the spot, and read aloud the words which had been so mysteriously traced upon the wall, Jean watching her meantime with intense interest:

“Do not grieve for Philip Randall.” (So ran the writing.)
“He is not dead, although he was a prisoner in this very room,

not long since. He escaped. If you wish to do the same thing, and will trust to an unseen guide, I will help you. When you have read this, erase it."

Overwhelmed with astonishment and gratitude, the two could only clasp each other, and weep in silence.

At last Jean raised her head, and there was a look of fortitude in her beautiful eyes.

"We are not forsaken, mother!" she said, softly. "God will not leave us desolate and helpless!"

They sat down, and waited patiently, feeling sure that they would hear from their unseen friend ere long.

They had no way of knowing the hour; they had no knowledge of day or night; but in reality the night had fallen, dark and gloomy, with threatening rain; when at last they heard a voice which seemed to proceed from the same corner of the room where the mysterious writing had appeared.

"Extinguish your candle!" said the voice, softly, "and come into this corner. Feel along the wall until you have found a nail, which has been driven in it. Press the head of the nail; you will soon be in my presence, and I will lead you to a place of safety."

They wrapped their cloaks about them, then blew out the candle, and going to the place indicated, Mrs. Conway passed her hand over the smooth wall. At length her fingers came in contact with the head of a nail. Pressing upon it firmly, the panel slid aside, and they knew that there was an opening in the wall. They could not see an inch before them; they knew not where they were going, nor into what unseen dangers their next step might precipitate them.

"Hold your daughter's hand, Mrs. Conway," said the strange voice, directly before them, "and I will lead you."

Mrs. Conway felt her hand clasped by firm, soft fingers, and then they moved forward, through what appeared to be

a narrow entry, then down a flight of winding, tortuous stairs.

On they went, sometimes in danger of falling ; but no accident occurred, and ere long they felt the cool night air blowing upon their faces, and knew that they were outside of the dreadful Red Tavern.

They strained their eyes through the darkness, to discover, if possible, the identity of their guide. But the utmost endeavors failed to elicit more than a dark figure, which hastened on noiselessly before them, and led the way through winding passages, in among trees and bushes, with a quick, cat-like tread, which was perfectly inaudible.

“Don’t speak a word !” whispered the voice of the unseen guide ; “we are getting on dangerous ground now.”

The two women could distinguish nothing through the gloom, and still trusting themselves to the guidance of their unknown friend, they made their way as rapidly as possible onward. All at once they came to a halt, and Mrs. Conway felt the hand of the stranger, which held her own, grow suddenly cold, and tremble violently.

“My God !” ejaculated their guide, in tones of deepest terror, “it is he—Gabriel Black. *We are lost !*”

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT HAPPENED TO PHILIP.

The vigilantes hemmed Philip in on all sides, and prepared to make short work of it this time.

“Hangin’s too good for him !” exclaimed one of the band—a burly ruffian named Cooper. “I move we give him a taste o’ somethin’ else.”

“What?” queried half a dozen hoarse voices in concert, while his comrades flocked nearer, like buzzards around carrion—“what do you mean, Cooper?”

Cooper paused to regale himself with a volley of choice expletives.

“Let’s chuck him into the river,” he cried, “and make buzzards’ meat o’ him double quick!”

“Why, he can swim like a fish!”

“You’re a fool!” retorted Cooper. “Do you think I’m green enough to give him a *chance* to swim? Come here, Rousseau,” indicating a sallow-visaged, lantern-jawed fellow, whose crape mask only partially concealed his ugliness from view; “*you’ve* got more sense than the balance. Come on and help me.”

Cooper produced a long rope as he spoke, and, with the assistance of Rousseau, managed to tie Philip’s arms tightly upon his breast; then they proceeded to bind his lower limbs together, Philip submitting without resistance, for he had made up his mind to die, and would not gratify the murderous ruffians with any show of terror. When he had been bound securely, and they had searched his pockets and found him unarmed, they carried the helpless man down the river-bank for a mile, perhaps, taunting, jeering, and insulting their prisoner all the way. At length they paused at a certain point in the river, which seemed suited to their diabolical purpose. It was a small bayou, bordered by overhanging thickets, where the moccasin and other venomous reptiles made their haunt, while the bayou itself was literally alive with alligators.

But the vigilantes little dreamed of the courage, the endurance, the fertile resources of the man whom they were about to murder; and little did they imagine that, as they bore him unresistingly along down the river-bank, Philip Randall was working out a problem in his mind—a plan for his own escape—which, impracticable as it might appear, was, nevertheless, not impossible; for the rope which bound his arms tightly, though new and strong, was no thicker than an ordinary clothes-line, and as they bore him onward, Philip’s strong white teeth were busy, gnawing like a rat—gnawing, gnawing, with-

out an instant's cessation ; and by the time that the river-bank was reached, and the spot where the vigilantes proposed tossing him in to his speedy destruction, Philip had gnawed the rope nearly in twain, except for a tiny fiber, which no one noticed.

They arrived at the place at last ; there was a short delay, and then the ringleaders in the atrocity lifted Philip in their arms, and, with a fiendish shout, cast him into the shining river. A sudden sensation among the alligators, a few ripples, and Philip Randall sank out of sight.

For a short time the vigilantes remained sitting upon their horses, watching with eager eyes for the reappearance of their victim ; but, strange, incredible as it seemed, they saw no trace of him.

"Cussed if ever *I* heered o' such a thing !" ejaculated Cooper, uneasily. "He never came up no more ! Wal, boys"—turning to the others as he spoke—"we kin tell the cap'n that he's done gone, anyhow, for we throwed him in, didn't we?"

"We *did* that !" responded Rousseau, shaking his grizzly head emphatically ; "but, then, thar's the question—the nat'ral question—*whar is he ?*"

As there was no way of finding an answer to this problem, the vigilantes decided to give it up, and agreeing to report to the captain Philip's certain fate, and claim the promised reward which Gabriel Black had offered for "making away" with Philip Randall, they finally turned their horses' heads and rode off.

They had hardly disappeared when Phil Randall's head appeared above the surface of the water, a few rods distant from the shore. City chap as he was, Philip could not be beaten, or scarcely equaled in the art of swimming. He had gone down below the surface like a fish, and there he had remained until his hated enemies were gone.

Now, as he arose once more, his teeth went to work at the threads which still remained between him and possible freedom. He gnawed furiously at it, keeping himself afloat meanwhile, and lo ! one arm was freed at last.

"Like a rat!" he muttered, with a little defiant laugh, "one single tiny creature can gnaw and gnaw until the strongest hempen rope is severed, and—I have done—rather—well, considering!"

He was swimming with his one free arm all this time, and making considerable progress. On, on, slowly but surely; he has loosened the rope which fastens the other arm, and now—he can swim quite well; and yet, still, with one, he manages to work at the ligaments which bind his limbs.

It is a long, weary, toilsome task, and Philip's strength is very nearly exhausted; but, after all, he succeeds, and is free—entirely free—at last! He tosses his handsome head above the water with a little shout of defiance.

"Ahead of you again, Gabriel Black!" he cries.

But at that very moment a sound falls upon his ear—a sound which causes him to pause and glance about him in bewildered confusion; and—well he may! For, coming slowly toward him, cleaving the water with its sharp nose, like the stern of a boat, is a monster alligator, perhaps sixteen feet long!

When the vigilantes had thrown Philip into the river, the alligators, startled by the occurrence, and being naturally inclined to be cowardly, had all vanished immediately. But, during the interval, their courage had gradually revived, and hunger began to get the upper hand; and now Philip perceived, with dilated, terror-distended eyes, that in the small bayou, where he had been thrown, and which was thickly overspread with huge lily-pods, there was a long row of alligators, one behind the other, like ships-of-war, meditating an attack, and led on by the hoary monster, whose dull round eyes were fixed upon his face, his huge jaws wide open, disclosing white, glittering tusks, terribly suggestive. What could he do? They had scented him now, and were advancing slowly upon him. He could not dive down to evade them, for the spot where he was was so thickly cov-

ered with lily-pods that diving was impossible, and slowly but surely they crowded around—one by one—and hemmed him in. Philip glanced about him, and his heart sank. Everything seemed against him. Must he die, then, alone, like a brute?

Slowly the leader approached him, transfixing him with its snaky eye. Philip drew himself up among the lily-pods, and began to beat the water vigorously with a wild hope of frightening them away.

The sun had set now, and twilight was coming on. Philip's heart shrank appalled from the thought of what the darkness would bring. Better to be in the hands of the vigilantes, and meet death at the muzzle of a gun, and die like a man; but to lie there, and be crushed between the ponderous jaws of these monsters, it was horrible!

On they came, increasing their speed now, as they neared their victim. Philip's heart gave a great tumultuous throb, and he gave himself up for lost.

"Never mind," he muttered, setting his teeth hard together, "if I *must* die, I'll die like a man!"

He turned as he spoke, and a low cry burst from his pallid lips.

CHAPTER XVII.

LADY'S FATE.

On floated the little boat, with poor Lady lying in the bottom. She had given up all hope now, and dropping the useless paddle, she crouched down in the canoe in silent despair. All at once a fragment of a text which she had heard her father read the Sabbath previous floated across her mind—just a few words, but they buoyed up the sinking heart, and kept Adelaide Lee from giving up altogether, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee."

"God help me!" moaned the girl, feebly. "God in heaven, forsake me not!"

God answers our prayers always when it is best and wisest for us that our petitions should be granted; and even now, coming to Lady across the pathless waters, the means of escape from her perilous position were drawing near.

The schooner Mayblossom, laden with shells from the great shell-banks at the mouth of the Tangipahoa River, had cast anchor far out on the lakes, at no great distance from where poor Lady's frail bark was tossing up and down, at the mercy of wind and wave.

Lifting her tired head at length, the poor girl caught a glimpse of a bright red light, and instantly, hope—which had not been dead in her heart, after all, but only sleeping—sprang up wide awake now, and, springing to a sitting posture, she drew the shawl closer about her, and began to shout wildly.

On the deck of the Mayblossom Captain Piper was sitting, his pipe in his mouth, composedly watching the heat lightning which flashed across the eastern sky, where great murky banks of clouds were piled up, and the lightning cut its way like a sword through the darkness.

"Think we're going to have a storm, captain?" asked a voice at his side, and a young man, tall and elegant, decidedly out of place on that rough vessel, drew near.

"Wall, no, I dare say we ain't, Mr. Lester," replied the captain, taking his pipe from between his lips, relighting it slowly as he spoke, "though I wouldn't be at all surprised if we did, arter all. For I must say I never come up the Tangipahoa, in all my experience o' twenty odd years aboard a schooner, but what I got ketched in a thunder-storm. Powerful place for thunder and lightnin' is the Tangipahoa."

"Indeed!" returned Harry Lester, with an amused smile, "then you do not visit the river often?"

Captain Piper took his pipe from between his lips, and

knocked the ashes from it against a railing near by, expectorating freely meanwhile.

"If he keeps that up long," muttered Lester, to himself, "he'll have the lake over the deck, I'm afraid. Queer old customer, if ever there was one."

"No, sir," the captain went on, slowly and deliberately. "I ain't much of a hand to go up yonder. That thar allus was a tight place ever since La Fitte had a rendezvous on its banks. Any way, this is my last trip over the lake for a long spell. I'm goin' to build a vessel myself, and sha'n't git out on the water agin till she's done. Hope your trip's been a pleasant one, Mr. Lester?"

Harry Lester tossed his burned-out cigar overboard with a little sigh.

"It has, indeed," he returned. "You see we city chaps get tired to death, sometimes, of the noise and confusion, and long to escape from it all for a short time. My profession is such (I believe I told you, Captain Piper, that I am an actor?) that I get used up entirely before the end of the theatrical season; and when the theater closes for the summer I'm at a loss for a quiet place to pass my vacation. Don't want any bustle or gayety, you know, for it's *rest* that I need, and especially this summer, when I was working on my own drama. That was how I came to take a trip on the Mayblossom, and I must say I have enjoyed roughing it immensely. Halloo, captain! what's that?"

For, clearly and distinctly over the water, came a shrill, musical call, rising and falling upon the breeze like a plaintive wail.

Captain Piper laid his pipe aside, and sprang to his feet.

"Thunderation!" he shouted, his ruddy face growing fearfully pale, "we're in for bad luck this trip! That ain't no vessel around, Lester, or we'd see their lights; so it must be a—a"—the old man's voice shook audibly—"a speerit!"

Lester laughed aloud.

"Spirit or not, I'm going to answer it!" he cried; and before

the old man could intervene to prevent him, the young actor had sent forth a loud, sonorous halloa !

Again came the answer, fainter this time.

Lester peered over the side of the vessel, straining his eyes through the gloom and darkness.

Lady had taken the paddle, and was paddling for dear life, right in the direction of that red light, which to her meant hope, safety.

On she came, and at length, panting and exhausted with her unusual efforts, she felt her boat grate against the side of the schooner, and in a moment more Harry Lester had leaped into the canoe, and, to his intense astonishment, found it occupied by a fainting woman.

Captain Piper, recovered from his superstitious fears now, lent a willing hand, and soon Lady was on board the Mayblossom, and fully recovered. Lester produced some wine and crackers, and the half-dead girl soon felt wonderfully revived.

Then she related her strange story ; and Lester's fine eyes glowed with indignation.

"You will have to proceed to New Orleans, Miss Lee," he observed, when Lady had finished her recital. "No money would tempt Captain Piper to return now. He is so superstitious, he would swear that the action would bring him bad luck ! Your best course is to come on to the city ; once arrived there, I will place you on board the train for your home. Trust me, Miss Lee," he added, gently ; "I have a sister of my own, and all women are sacred in my eyes."

So Lady, very grateful for the kindness shown her, submitted quietly, and so the Mayblossom proceeded to the city of New Orleans. Arrived there in a few hours' time, Mr. Lester left the schooner, and returned with an elderly lady—a plainly dressed, matronly woman, with a pleasant face—whom he introduced as his mother. She took Lady away at once to a large boarding-house, where she made her very comfortable, and was overwhelming in her acts of kind thoughtfulness.

The morning after her arrival, Lady accidentally discovered in her room a newspaper; it was a recent number, and almost the first paragraph that met her startled eyes in a column of personal items was this:

“Mr. J. H. Lee, of the Lee Plantation, has sold his fine place, with all the stock, farming implements, etc., and, with his estimable wife, departed for Europe, yesterday, for an indefinite stay. The old people have never rallied from the shock of the death of their only daughter, Miss Adelaide—a beautiful and accomplished young lady; and they have decided to leave their native land for a time, hoping that change of scene and climate may restore Mrs. Lee’s failing health.”

Poor Lady! All was lost!

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MIDNIGHT ROBBER.

As Philip turned his eyes a low cry of gratitude escaped his lips, and that strong hope which rarely dies in the human breast sprang up and illumined his path once more. It was an apparently trivial matter that had elicited his gratitude and made fainting hope revive; but Philip had learned enough during his sojourn in the pine woods to feel that it would have a decided influence upon his desperate case.

A large number of hogs, frightened and tormented by dogs—a pack of half-starved, ravenous hounds, bounding with fearful howls after them—had, in their terror and demoralization, rushed down directly to the river’s edge; a gaunt, nearly famished cur leaped after the foremost of the pack, and the porker, forgetting in its terror its normal dread of water, sprang wildly into the river, followed by the whole terrified crew. The dull eyes of the alligators glistened greedily. Doubtless they considered it wisest to secure the dainty (?) morsels at once, feeling so certain of their larger prey. With one accord they turned toward the frightened swine and closed around them. There

followed a succession of fearful yells, a crunching of bones. Philip waited to see no more. Their attention being otherwise occupied, and their heads turned away, the alligators failed to observe Philip, as, with a silent prayer for help, he scrambled from among the lily pods into clearer water, and struck out boldly for the shore.

But just then one of the foremost of the alligators, chancing to turn his head, caught a glimpse of the young man cleaving the water with swift strokes, and with a sudden movement the alligator, dashing the water furiously with its tail, started in pursuit. On swam Philip for dear life—on, on—he's nearly at the goal now; the alligator is close behind him; he can feel it cut the water within two feet of his own limbs; but Philip redoubles his efforts and flies through the water.

The alligator is a natural coward, and rarely attacks a grown person; but when half starved, as was now the case, and maddened by the taste of blood, which it had already obtained, there is no telling to what lengths its voracity may lead it. Certainly this was a most formidable monster, and Philip's heart sank as he felt it gaining upon him; nearer—nearer; a moment more and the alligator would have had him fast enough. But just then, on the opposite bank of the river, a man appeared, clad in hunting garb, with a rifle in his hand. An alligator is a difficult customer to dispatch; its tough hide is almost impervious to bullets, and hunters usually like the sport and the *eclat* of having killed a particularly large one. The hunter raised his rifle, took deliberate aim, and fired. The alligator went down out of sight, the water all around him dyed with a crimson stain.

Hidden by a clump of driftwood, Philip escaped the hunter's observation, and the alligator appearing no more, Philip, from his post of observation, saw the hunter move away. He made no attempt to attract the man's notice, for he knew not but that he might be one of the hated vigilantes, and Philip was too prudent to risk an encounter. But as soon as he had gone

Philip swam to shore, and pulling himself up by an overhanging cypress, landed in safety. Then he arose and looked about him. His clothes were as wet as they could be, and he was half famished, but he feared to go in search of a habitation, for he knew not how soon he might stumble across some of the vigilantes, and he preferred to die of starvation, all alone in the forest, to that alternative.

Sitting on the river-bank, endeavoring to dry his drenched garments, he heard, at length, the whoop of a cattle-driver, and presently a little negro boy came in sight, driving his cows home from the evening milking. Philip beckoned him to his side, and showing him a piece of money (for fortunately a small sum of money had escaped the notice of the vigilantes), he begged the child to bring him something to eat. This the boy consented to do, and then disappeared around a bend in the river-bank. After a considerable delay he reappeared with some coarse corn bread and fat bacon, which he presented to Philip, received the promised reward, and soon hurried away as though half-frightened at his encounter with the wet and forlorn-looking stranger.

Philip partook of the unpalatable fare with keen relish, for "hunger is the best sauce," and then, as it was getting quite dark, he arose, and feeling greatly refreshed, and his clothes being nearly dry, he determined to move on. The negro lad had informed him that he was on the road to Lee's Landing, and Philip hoped that if once he arrived there he would find a schooner loading with wood or shells, upon which he might secure passage for New Orleans, where he proposed obtaining a detective to assist in the search for Jean and her mother.

With this hope in his heart he hastened on. Darkness fell over all things, yet Philip made his way slowly, but surely. At last he could go no farther. The night had grown old now, and so dark that he saw at once the folly

of attempting farther progress. So he seated himself, with a bed of soft moss for a cushion, and prepared to wait for the coming of morning. All at once his eyes fell upon a light—a small bright light—moving slowly onward toward him.

“A “will-o’-the-wisp, or a “jack-a-lantern!” he decided, after a long survey; but as the light grew rapidly larger and nearer, Philip finally distinguished that it was a lantern in the hands of some person, and as its rays fell upon the face of the man, Philip could with difficulty restrain himself; for he recognized Gabriel Black. Upon his shoulders Black carried a spade, an ax, and a rifle. Heavily laden, indeed; but he had come armed, determined that his work should not be interrupted this time, or if it was, some one would be hurt. For the villain was on his way to make a second attempt to rob the lonely widow and helpless orphan. He drew very near the spot where Philip was sitting, and paused there. Then he placed the lantern on the ground, and laid the rifle beside it with the ax; then taking the spade, he moved slowly toward a certain tree.

“Here is the gum with the cross upon it,” he said aloud, his voice breaking the silence of the lonely place, with a strange, supernatural sound. “I’m ahead this time. And now for the chest of gold!”

Philip Randall arose cautiously, and creeping silently forward, seized the rifle which Black had deposited upon the ground. There was a light in Philip’s eyes that looked dangerous.

CHAPTER XIX.

DISAPPOINTED HOPE.

“All is lost!” repeated Jean, mechanically.
They stood silent as the dead, while the tall, dark form of a

man came slowly toward them, a lantern swinging in one hand. He held it up, and its yellow rays shone upon the pale faces of the two refugees.

Their unknown guide had disappeared.

“Great heavens!” ejaculated Gabriel Black, as he gazed into the pallid faces, “you *are* smart, sure enough, to escape from the Red Tavern! You’ll lose your way out here, though. Come.”

He caught Jean rudely by the arm as he spoke. But he had gone a little too far. She turned suddenly, and, clenching her fist, struck him a stinging blow full in the face.

“Dare to touch me!” she panted, “and I will strangle you, you monster! Your very touch is pollution!”

“Curse you!” groaned Black, madly; “I’ll make you pay dearly for that blow, madam! Turn about, now, both of you, and get into the house again. You shall know what it is to suffer now, I promise you.”

In silence—for resistance was useless—Jean and her mother moved onward, their faces turned in the direction of the hated den, where they seemed likely to pass the remainder of their lives. It would be useless to oppose the will of the inhuman wretch who had them in his power; for they were two feeble women in the hands of a fiend, who had others as vile as himself at his beck and call, and “might makes right,” sometimes.

They were confined in a small, uncomfortable room. The one window was not barred, or particularly fastened, but old Corney’s wife was set to watch them—a coarse, vulgar woman, fit mate for her brutal husband. As soon as the prisoners beheld their keeper, they realized that there was no help from that quarter.

Time passed, and nothing occurred to break the monotonous calm about them, and gradually the two poor creatures settled down into a dull apathy. There seemed no hope in the wide world for them. All was darkness—dreary, and unlighted by a single star—and their hearts were well-nigh despairing. Mrs.

Corney reported their weak and feeble state, and wine and nourishing food were furnished the two prisoners ; for Black had no intention of killing them—not just yet, at all events.

One day, sitting silent and sad, they heard a faint tapping at the window-pane. Jean glanced at her mother in alarm. Mrs. Corney arose, and approached the window carelessly. A little bird—a tiny, snow-white creature—was outside, beating the pane violently with its wings. Mrs. Corney's dull eyes were upon her prisoners' movements, and Mrs. Conway forced an air of indifference as she said :

“ Mrs. Corney, couldn't you get me that bird ? See ! it is a pigeon, and I am very fond of them.”

Now, Mrs. Corney had but one idea in existence—*eating*. She could understand and appreciate her prisoner's desire to possess the dainty morsel ; so, with a less ungracious manner than usual, she arose and opened the window. As I have already said, there was no unusual fastening to this window, Mrs. Corney's constant presence in the room, both night and day, being considered sufficient precaution ; and there was an armed sentinel posted below the window, which fact the two women had already ascertained.

As Mrs. Corney raised the sash, the pigeon, a lovely white thing, flew in, and fluttering across to Jean, nestled upon her shoulder. Jean could scarcely repress a cry of delight ; for she recognized the bird as a carrier pigeon, which had belonged to her dear friend, Lady Lee.

How could she communicate that fact to her mother, who had never seen the bird before, and of course had no idea to whom it belonged ? Their jailer's eyes were upon them, and Jean felt instinctively that Mrs. Corney must not know the truth. Jean was a tolerable French scholar, and could have expressed herself in that language (which was Greek to Mrs. Corney), but unfortunately her mother's knowledge of French was quite limited, so that would be impracticable. All at once a sudden inspiration darted into the girl's bright mind.

Smoothing the pigeon's ruffled feathers, and petting it in her pretty demonstrative fashion, Jean managed to turn her back upon Mrs. Corney, and glance into her mother's face significantly, and meanwhile upon her fingers she began to spell a sentence in the deaf and dumb alphabet. For the Conways had once owned a deaf and dumb servant—a negro who could neither speak nor hear; and the family had all learned to converse quite fluently in that dumb fashion. And Jean's nimble fingers managed to spell quickly :

“The bird belongs to Lady Lee. Could I send a message to her?”

For poor Jean did not know or dream of all that had befallen her friend, and that Lady's fate was as pitiable as her own.

Mrs. Conway nodded encouragingly. Jean understood and determined to make a prodigious effort.

Providence favored her. After a time Mrs. Corney arose as though to leave the room.

“I'll be back in a minute,” she answered. “Don't airy one o' ye dare to move !”

And the door closed behind her. There was not an instant to lose. Jean snatched a pin from her dress, and with it rudely scratched one of her fair white arms until the blood spirted forth. Her mother meanwhile had torn a small scrap of wall-paper from the wall, which chanced to be covered with a hideous representation of various birds, and fishes, and reptiles—supposed by Red Tavern critics to be marvels of art and beauty. Dipping the pin into the fresh red blood which flowed from her arm, Jean managed to scrawl on the reverse side of the paper these words :

“Mother and I are prisoners in the old Red Tavern. For God's sake, help us.
JEAN CONWAY.”

A bit of thread lay on the floor of the room, where Mrs. Cor-

ney had been sewing. Jean picked it up and dextrously fastened the tiny note to the neck of the bird. Jean knew its habits well. The pigeon had been trained to carry messages, and the hearts of the prisoners beat high with hope. Jean ventured to lift the window a trifle, and with a little flutter of its white wings, the pigeon flew away, just as Mrs. Corney entered, a frown on her sullen face.

“Didn’t I tell ye not to *dare* to move?” she cried, angrily. “Wal, seein’ as how ye’ve done it, ye can stay thar now, and see all thar is to be seen.”

As she spoke she pointed one skinny finger, and from the window the terrified Jean beheld Gabriel Black on the green outside, his rifle aimed at the little carrier pigeon.

There followed a loud report, something small and white fluttered to the ground; and half dead with disappointment and dismay, the two women beheld this hope, like the others, crumbled to ruin.

After that there seemed nothing left to them but utter despair. They had forgotten that

“After the night, the light,
After the storm, a calm.”

CHAPTER XX.

WAITING FOR VENGEANCE.

Let us go back to where John Averill and Mr. Lee, with their prisoner, the brutal vigilante, returned to Bob’s cabin, in quest of poor Lady’s remains. But when they arrived there they found the house deserted. Marian and the little ones had

“Folded their tents, like the Arabs,
And silently stolen away.”

John rushed frantically to the little grave—the low, red, clayey mound, with a few blades of cocoa grass just beginning

to show their ubiquitous heads above the soil. He searched about the premises until at length he had found a spade, and began at once to dig. For, horrible as the possibility was—fearful as the sight upon which he expected to gaze—John felt that the uncertainty of suspense would be even more horrible. He worked away with a will—the stricken old father, who had sunk upon the grass not far off—turning his head and bowing it upon his clasped hands. Bob lay, still bound, upon the ground near by.

On, on, John's toil relaxed not. The perspiration was standing in great beads upon his clammy forehead, and his heart surged and beat tumultuously. On he worked. His spade struck something at last with a hollow thud. He paused, and his lips moved in silent prayer. Then, with a heroic resolve, he threw aside the spade, and sprang into the aperture. Yes, there was a coffin, rude and rough. Setting his teeth hard together, his face pallid, his eyes blazing, John wrenched off the lid—then recoiled, with a low exclamation of horror.

A putrefying human body met his gaze—a woman, for the hair, dark and shining like satin, was plaited in a coil upon her head—but the features were entirely indistinguishable, and covered with a damp, yellowish mold.

Shuddering with horror, John buried his face in his hands.

To think that she, the beautiful, sprightly girl who had laughed in his face just the other day, when he had told her of his love, should be there before him now, a thing of corruption!

Ah! in that hour, if John Averill had stood face to face with the leader of the vigilantes, the wretch who was responsible for this hellish work, he would have crushed him as he would a viper in his path.

John left the horrible pit, and came and stood before Mr. Lee. His pallid face confirmed the old man's worst fears.

“We will take—it—away with us!” groaned John, pointing toward the open grave. “Ride on home, Mr. Lee, if you are able, and break the fearful intelligence to your wife. I will re-

main here, and have—the body—properly fastened in the coffin; then I shall take this man's wagon—I see one yonder—and follow you as rapidly as possible. But,” and a savage gleam lighted up John Averill's dark face—“I'm bound to have it out with yonder devil! I have a mind to kill you as you lie there!” he cried, gazing into the scowling face of the ruffian, Bob—“*you murderer!*”

“I only done what I was told to do!” growled the man, his terror at his own imminent fate overcoming his prudence.

A sudden inspiration came to John. What if he killed this brute cowering at his feet—what good would it do? It would not bring his lost darling back to life, from that hideous pit and the reeking habilaments of the grave. This man, Bob, had only done what he, as a vigilante, was sworn to do—*obey his leader in every detail*. After all, he was scarcely responsible. But the leader—he who *was* responsible—Heaven! let him cross John Averill's path! John clenched his hands fiercely, and for a moment there was *murder* in his eyes. He stooped over the trembling wretch at his feet.

“Kneel down!” commanded Averill, sternly—“down on your knees! I am going to deal with you as you deserve!”

“Kill me, I 'spose?” muttered the wretch. “Wal, go ahead! I only done my duty and kept my oath to the cap'n.”

“Listen!”

John transfixed him with his angry eyes.

“I have your revolver here!”—holding it up before Bob's frightened eyes—“and I can take your life as easily as I can move my hand. But I swear to let you go free, if you will disclose the name of the leader of the vigilantes.”

“You *will*?”

“I have said it!”

Bob's dull eyes brightened. This was more than he had dared hope for.

“And, mind yon,” continued John, savagely, “if you dare

to give me the wrong name—to attempt to deceive me—or set me on a false scent, I'll have every detective in the State of Louisiana after you, and your life won't be worth a nickel. Do you understand?"

"Yes," replied the wretch, doggedly. "And you'll keep your word, Mr. Averill?"

"So help me, God!" responded John, solemnly. "Take your choice—and be quick about it; your life, or divulge the the name of your captain!"

"All right; I'll tell you—and I swear, afore God, it's the real honest truth I'm a-tellin'! The name o' the captain o' the vigilantes is—is—" his voice sank almost to a whisper, as though he feared that it might reach the ears of some of the band possibly lurking thereabouts—"his name is Gabriel Black!"

"God in heaven!" groaned John, "I will have his life before another week goes around. There is not room enough on this earth for him and me! Get up now! I have no further use for you, only—I warn you—keep out of my sight in future! You will, if you are prudent!"

He unbound the ruffian, and as Bob staggered to his feet once more, John wheeled suddenly and pointed the loaded revolver straight at his heart.

"Get out of this!" he cried, savagely—"double quick, too, or I'll forget myself and put a bullet into you any way. The very sight of you drives me mad!"

Bob did not pause to argue the matter. He vaulted upon his horse, which was grazing not far away, and turning his head in an opposite direction, rode off as though all the furies were after him. The vigilantes, in round numbers, were brave enough; a dozen or two in company could accomplish most dastardly outrages; but, individually, they were a cowardly set, or they would never have connected themselves in such a fearful brotherhood. For "the bravest are the tenderest," and a bully is always a coward and a sneak.

Scarcely had Bob's flying figure disappeared from sight, when a negro came around a bend in the clearing—the same negro who had warned John regarding the intended attack of the vigilantes on the Lee Place. With his assistance, John succeeded in finishing his fearful task, and then, harnessing his own horse, by means of an improvised harness, into Bob's wagon, the two started on their journey to the Lee Place with the sad burden.

I pass over the mother's fearful grief; pen cannot depict it or words do it justice. At length, being convinced that Mrs. Lee would certainly die, if they remained at the lonely, desolate home, John Averill proposed that they dispose of their plantation to himself, and go away for a long journey, hoping to benefit the poor old lady's health. If they saw fit to return again, his house should be their home. He named a generous sum for the property, and paid the cash upon the spot. So, ere Lady had been dead (as they believed her) scarcely three weeks, the old couple had taken their departure for Europe, where Mr. Lee had relatives; and John Averill remained at the Lee Place, determined to carry on the farm, and keep green the little grave, which had been made in a beautiful, shady nook, and which, he believed, held his lost darling.

A marble shaft arose skyward, bearing the dainty name of "*Adelaide*"—simply this, and nothing more; purple pansies clustered about the base of the monument, and the grass grew soft and green around, starred with lilies and daisies.

Here the young man came, every evening, just at sunset. He grew quiet and reserved; life had lost all charm for him, and the neighbors began to say that young Averill was going crazy. But one object possessed his mind night and day—the wild, unappeased hunger for *vengeance*—vengeance upon the man who had brought all this misery upon his life!

He had sworn to gain it; and his eyes were ever open, his heart vigilantly watching for that time. And woe to Gabriel Black if he falls into the hands of this, his bitter, implacable,

unforgiving enemy ; for the lion of the forest, that rends its victim with its iron jaws, is more gentle than the unquenchable hatred of the man who seeks vengeance for all this wrong !

CHAPTER XXI.

LADY.

And where was Adelaide Lee all this time ? On a sick-bed, ill with nervous fever, the natural consequence of the tax imposed upon her system, the result of all that she had gone through. Many days were born and died before Lady was herself again, and during her entire illness she was carefully tended by Mrs. Lester, the mother of Harry, and his pretty sister, Lillian. They were all theatrical people, and a kinder, nobler-hearted family could not be found. Truly Lady could have fallen into no better hands. During her long illness she learned to love Mrs. Lester dearly, while Lillian became as a sister to her.

At length, one morning in early autumn, Lady was pronounced convalescent, and her recovery certain. Sitting in her own room at the boarding-house where the Lesters made their home, clad in a dainty white wrapper, and looking very wan and *spirituelle*, Lady received Harry Lester for the first time. He came and sat down beside her, laying a bouquet of exquisite white lilies in her thin hand. Lady remembered her lilies at home, and the tears rushed into her eyes.

“How kind you are, Mr. Lester !” she murmured, softly, pressing the flowers to her lips. The action was involuntary, and Lady’s memory was busy with home scenes and home sounds ; but it broke down the barrier of reserve which had hitherto lain between the young man and herself. Harry Lester caught the little fragile hand, and pressed it to his lips.

“How I love you !” he exclaimed, passionately. “I cannot help it, Adelaide !” he added. “I have striven to repress my

love, but it will not be repressed ; the love lives, and will continue to grow and flourish. Adelaide, darling, say that you care a little—that there is some hope for me !”

Lady felt her frightened heart grow numb and chill.

“I—I am sorry, Mr. Lester,” she faltered, faintly. “I had not dreamed of this. I—cannot marry any one. I do not—” she hesitated, a pink flush stealing into her white cheek.

“Are you betrothed to any one ?” he cried, anxiously.

She shook her head.

“No ; I do not—care—for any one.” She brought out the last words with a gasp. “I—I—oh, do not trouble me about love. I do not—ever—intend to marry.”

“Queer little thing !” Harry could not repress the exclamation. “You will learn to love me in time, dear,” he went on ; “only promise to become my wife, and I will teach you to love me. You do not *dislike* me, Lady ?”

“Dislike you ?” she repeated, blushing furiously now. “Oh, no, no ! How could I ? You saved my life. And you and your family have all been so kind to me. Indeed, I like you very much.

“Then promise to be my wife,” he pleaded. “And, Lady, we will go to Europe, and find your parents. Think how happy they will be to find you living ! As for myself, I know I am not much more than a stranger to you, but you can easily satisfy yourself in regard to my family and character—everything that a prudent woman would wish to know before she unites her life to another’s ‘for better, for worse.’ Perhaps”—his face clouded—“you object to my profession of actor ?”

“By no means,” cried Lady, heartily. “And—and I was going to ask you to get me a situation on the stage. I have never acted, but I feel as if I *could*, and I think I might be fitted to fill the place of *soubrette*. Lilly thinks I might in time become a *comedienne*, and I should like it of all things, Mr. Lester.”

“Say *Harry*,” he whispered.

Lady turned her head away.

"*Harry*, then, she pouted. "But will you promise to find me a situation?"

"If you are determined to work I will do the best I can for you," replied Lester, gravely. "But, first, I must have an answer. Lady, dear, will you not try and care a little for me? Will you not engage yourself to me, Lady, and be my promised wife? You do not love any one else; so, Lady, say yes."

And ere she was scarcely aware of it his ring was on her finger, and poor Lady felt that she was irrevocably bound.

"Remember, I do not love you," she whispered, after a pause. "I have only promised to *try*, and if I should discover that I—I—it's absurd to *think* of such a thing—but if I *should* ever love any one dearly, I'll be bound to tell you, Harry. And then—well, you mustn't make too sure of me!"

And he assured her that he would be glad to get her on any terms. So, the matter was settled; and Lady, who was being misled by feelings of pure gratitude, was betrothed to Harry Lester.

She had already sent a note to the seminary where Jean Conway had been educated, begging her friend to come to her, but had received a line in reply from the lady principal to the effect that Miss Conway had never returned to school.

Lady knew not where to look for the Conways. She had no other friends in New Orleans, and she felt alone in the great wide world, save for the Lester family.

She adhered to her resolution to "go on the stage;" for she was too independent to be a burden upon the friends who had been so kind to her. She gave Harry Lester no rest, until at length a position was assigned her, and Lady went to work with a will to fit herself for her new duties.

By nature she was well calculated for a *comediennne*. There was a mine of talent and versatility hidden in her gay nature, and by dint of diligent study and careful rehearsing Lady soon did credit to herself and her instructors, and before many weeks had rolled away she had gone far ahead of their expectations.

It was decided that she should appear before the public for her *debut* as the heroine in the modern drama of the "Hidden Hand," quite a difficult character for a *debutante* to essay, but Lady was quite up to the mark.

She insisted upon being billed as "Lady Lee," and her friends submitted to her wishes. And so, the night of her first appearance on the boards arrived, and flaming posters all over the city announced in flaring characters the first appearance of the sprightly young *comediennne*, Lady Lee, and behind the curtain Lady herself, in a fever of excitement, awaited her call.

It came at last, and the first act passed off very creditably, Lady "bringing the house down" more than once.

The play progressed, and the audience seemed spell-bound. It was the scene with the outlaw, where the heroine of the drama is about to propel the robber chief through a trap in the floor to regions below, when suddenly Lady happened to raise her eyes, and they fell upon a face in a stage-box near her. Trembling like an aspen, she tottered and fell upon the stage like one bereft of life.

CHAPTER XXII.

FOUND !

Philip Randall crept softly on toward the spot where Gabriel Black had begun diligently to excavate. Then a sudden thought struck him, and he paused in the shelter of a pine thicket, leaning on the rifle, his eyes meantime watching the movements of the villain. Spadeful after spadeful of earth was dug up and tossed aside. Black worked faithfully ; the perspiration streamed down his pallid face ; with hands trembling from the unusual exertion, he paused to mop the perspiration from his brow, and then stooped over the hole in the ground, and resumed his work with feverish excitement, his whole soul absorbed in the task before him. As yet, he had not been interrupted, as on

previous occasions ; and already his evil eyes began to glow with avarice as he dug lower and lower, and finally had the satisfaction of feeling his spade strike against something with a dull thud.

With a muffled exclamation of delight, he redoubled his efforts, already prodigious, and went on with a will. On—on—he struck the spade into the ground once more—and again—and all the time the eager eyes of his hated enemy and rival were upon him, full of deadly hatred ; only waiting—biding his time—to see what the end would be.

“It is well !” muttered Philip to himself, “to let the villain unearth the treasure which belongs, by right, to Jean and her mother. Since he has been the cause of all their privation and suffering, his hands shall be the means of restoring to them their rightful heritage.”

So Philip stood and watched him, and Black, utterly ignorant of the truth, worked away.

All at once there came a deafening report ; earth and sky alike were darkened, and with a wild shriek of agony, Gabriel Black gave a leap into the air, and fell upon the ground.

When the smoke had cleared away, Philip drew near the discomfited villain. He lay still and half senseless. Philip procured some water from a little “branch” near by, and threw it into his face. He did not desire that the wretch should perish, until he had had it out with him.

At length Black opened his eyes and stared about him. It was early dawn now, and the two men glared in each other’s faces.

“Keep back !” shrieked Black, as his eyes met those of Philip ; “you are Phil Randall’s ghost !”

Philip spurned the fallen wretch with his foot.

“I would have been a ghost now, Gabriel Black,” he said, coolly, “if you had had your way ; but, you see, ‘the wicked shall not always prosper,’ and God helped me !”

Black lifted one hand, and passed it slowly over his eyes.

"It is Phil Randall!" he muttered—"Phil Randall, *alive!*"

"To be sure I'm alive!" cried Philip; "and now let me ask you a question: What are you doing here?"

Black turned his face away; he could not meet the look in the eyes of the man whom he had so fearfully wronged.

"Tell me—or I shall kill you!" cried Philip, raising his rifle as he spoke.

"You would not shoot a man when he is down?" cried Black, in horrified alarm.

"What hurt you?" queried Philip, with a gesture of contempt.

"I—I was digging yonder," groaned Black. "I had a little business, you see——"

"Yes, I know!" interpolated Philip, grimly; "you were robbing the widow and orphan! Go on! What hurt you?"

Black winced a little.

"Well, I was only taking what is my own!" he said, harshly.

"Jean Conway is my wife, you know!"

Philip sprang forward, as though he would strangle the fallen wretch; then he hesitated, and drew back.

"Go on!" he commanded.

"It was—something in the pit yonder!" explained Black.

"An infernal machine, I reckon! I know I'm hit in the leg. I—I think I shall die with the pain!"

"Oh, no!" responded Philip, sardonically; "you will not die from that! Black, you were born for a *higher* fate!"

Black shuddered, but attempted no reply.

And Philip proceeded to examine the aperture, to discover the cause of the strange explosion. He found a small box, ingeniously constructed, and filled with explosive material—so arranged that a sudden blow upon it had caused it to explode; but, fortunately for the villain, the blow struck by his spade had not been forcible enough to kill him, though it had wounded and disabled him.

When the fragments of the box had been carefully removed,

Philip leaned the rifle against a tree, where it would be within easy reach, and, taking the spade, began to dig. He worked away like a giant for nearly an hour. He was fearfully weak, and his form trembled with fatigue and excitement. But at last his spade also struck something, and this time there was no report or explosion.

Breathlessly, Philip stood over the aperture, and peered within. Black lay near, watching him with eyes full of fiendish hatred, but not daring to utter a word.

Philip knelt upon the ground, and gazed long and earnestly into the pit. What he saw caused the blood to rush into his pale face, and he trembled violently ; for he could distinguish plainly the outline of a box—a heavy-looking, iron-bound chest. Philip sank upon the ground to collect his thoughts and decide upon a course of action.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHAT LADY DID.

The face which Lady Lee had beheld, gazing upon her with a look of incredulous wonder and amazement from the stage-box, was the face of John Averill. He had come down to New Orleans to purchase supplies for his plantation, and had been confronted everywhere on the streets of the city with the gay posters which announced the first appearance of some actress who bore the name of his lost love ; and, half-stupefied at the strange coincidence, he decided to attend the theater that night, and see this actress for himself. And—wonder of wonders!—he had been confronted by Lady ; no use to deny it, or to try to hide from himself the strange, incredulous truth. There she was, before his eyes ; not dead—not lying under the lilies and daisies, in the pretty green nook, where that little grave was made ; but—here—on the stage, amid the bright lights—in her pretty costume—her saucy, piquant face wreathed with smiles—

smiling into the faces of her audience, with the same old charm of manner which had always been so irresistible in Lady Lee.

Half demented, John sat silent, and watched her. He had eyes for no one else on the stage. He knew nothing concerning the play ; he only gazed at Lady, until the magnetism of his gaze must have attracted her, for she turned suddenly, saw him, and fell to the floor in a dead faint.

She was carried behind the scenes, and soon restored to consciousness.

The perplexed manager came before the curtain with an humble apology ; but Lady, once herself again, insisted on going on with the play ; and she did—to the very end.

But when the curtain had fallen upon the last act, and, literally covered with floral tributes, the young actress had sought the privacy of her own dressing-room, all her enforced calmness gave way, and she bowed her head, and wept tears of bitter agony.

There was a rap at the door of the room, and Lillian Lester appeared.

“Why, Lady dear, what is the matter?” she cried, aghast at the sight of Adelaide in tears ; “one would think that you had made a positive failure, instead of being quoted as the grand success of the season ! Manager Horton is waiting outside with a splendid engagement to offer you ! Lady, dear, you are bound to become famous ! And Harry—oh ! he is so proud of you ! Come, Lady, don’t cry—whatever is the matter ?”

Another rap at the door precluded any explanation, and some one brought a card, with a request for admission. Lady glanced at the card ; her heart told her, before her eyes had fallen upon it, who was coming. Yes—John Averill ! That was the name.

Lady pressed the senseless bit of pasteboard to her lips. She could not refuse him an audience ; and in a moment more he was standing before her—just the same cool, quiet John as ever.

"Lady!" he said, with a strange intonation in his low, deep voice. "My God! what is the meaning of this? We all have mourned you as dead!"

She caught both his hands in hers.

"Oh, John! John!" she sobbed; "it is so strange—so wonderful! Sit down, and let me tell you all about it!"

And she did. From first to last her romantic story was told; and, as she proceeded with her narrative, John's face grew deadly white; he clenched his hands hard, and set his teeth, with a muttered imprecation. But when she (determined that he should know all) revealed to him—as she knew that she was in honor bound to do—her engagement to Harry Lester, he bowed his head upon his clasped hands, and uttered never a word.

When she had finished, he arose. His face was white as a dead man's—stern, and set, and joyless; one would say, looking upon it, that it would never know a smile again.

"Good-by!" he said, holding out his hand.

"Good-by?" queried Lady, in wondering surprise. "Why—why—are you not going to take me home?"

He gave her a strange, startled look.

"Your parents are in Europe, Miss Adelaide," he said, quietly.

Lady's face flushed. She had forgotten the sad truth, that she was homeless and alone.

"Good-by!" she said, softly. "You have not—not changed to me, Mr. Averill?"

It was a strange, unexpected question, and the girl's dark eyes wore a wistful expression. He answered her with a glance of tenderness; his stern mouth quivered, but he was like adamant. He wrung her little hand, passed through the door, and was gone!

There was an expression of determination on the girl's face, as she stood there, alone in the room; then, going to the door, she sent a messenger for Harry Lester. He came at once; she

motioned him to be seated, and a long conference followed.

When Harry left the room an hour later, his face was set and white, and he trembled, and walked with unsteady steps, like a drunkard; but in his eyes there shone the light of a noble resolve. He called Lillian, and as soon as Lady was ready he accompanied them home.

The next morning Manager Horton received a line from the new "star," declining all further connection with the theater; she had decided to relinquish the theatrical profession. There was a twinkle in the keen gray eye of the worthy manager, which strove with disappointment for the mastery.

"Going to retire from the stage!" he soliloquized. "They never retire but for one object. Of course, she and Lester will make a match of it, and there's an end to all my hopes!"

But Lady was not thinking of Harry Lester, at least not in connection with a matrimonial *debut*. She had sent a line to John Averill, begging him to call upon her that morning before he should leave the city for his home. White and worn with a night's weary vigil, John came, wondering greatly what her errand could be. She laid her hand in his, and looked into his honest eyes.

"John," she said, softly, "you used to care for me, didn't you?"

"Stop!" he cried, harshly. "I cannot endure to see you exult in my misery. Oh, Lady! you used to have a kinder heart!"

"John," she went on, quietly, ignoring his interruption, "I see that you have *not* changed; you love me, do you not?"

The look which he gave her spoke volumes, and with a blushing face she went on:

"And—so—John—I have sent for you to tell you—that—if you still want me, I will be your wife! Will you take me, John, 'for better, for worse?'"

He sprang to his feet, and grasped her slender wrist.

"Lady! Lady!" he groaned, "are you playing an unwor-

manly trick upon me? And—you—engaged to Harry Lester?"

"I was," returned Lady; "but—but—I am not now! I will be engaged to you, if you like!"

For when Harry Lester had heard all, and learned the true state of affairs, his noble heart would not stand in the way of the happiness of the woman whom he loved, so he had released Lady, and had given her back her freedom.

And Lady and John were betrothed at last. She had loved him all the time; but she would not admit the truth yet. John, in the fullness of his happiness, could not refrain from saying, as he gazed into the girl's dark, loving eyes:

"Didn't I tell you, Lady, that the next time the subject of marriage should be mentioned between us, it would be *you*, and not I, who would——"

"Oh! nonsense, John!"

And she held up her red lips to be kissed.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FINIS.

Philip sat down beside the open tomb, where the iron chest had been buried, to collect his scattered senses. For Philip was a practical, matter-of-fact sort of a young man—and all the time since old David Conway's death, he had entertained some doubts of the wild tale to which he had listened. Not that he doubted Conway, who was the very soul of honor—and a man is not apt to invent a deliberate falsehood on his death-bed, with the grim messenger staring him in the face—but the whole tale had sounded so wild and improbable, that Philip almost believed it to have been the offspring of a wandering brain. But now he had proved the truth of a portion of the story, at least; for here before his eyes, hidden away under the surface of the earth, was the palpable fact—the iron chest. He saw at a glance that

his strength was inadequate to stir the ponderous thing ; for, although not very large, it was plainly too heavy to think of getting it up to *terra firma* without assistance. So he seated himself to rest from his arduous labor, and hoping that some one would pass that way who might lend a helping hand. At last some one *did* come, and who in the world should it be but John Averill ! He leaped from his horse, and caught Philip's hand.

"Great Heaven !" he cried, "is it really you, Randall—alive ?"

"Alive !" repeated Philip, gravely, "and ready for vengeance !"

John's eyes followed the quick glance of Philip's, and his own blazed as they fell upon the prostrate form of Gabriel Black lying on the ground. He sprang forward and caught the villain by the throat.

"At last !" he groaned, between his set teeth.

"Wait, John !"

Philip's hand was on his own to stay him in his mad work.

"Wait," repeated Philip. "I have something to tell you first."

They seated themselves. and the story was soon told. John related his own experience in New Orleans, and how he had left Lady there with the Lesters until he could return and prepare everything for her coming home. He had already cabled to Europe, begging Mr. and Mrs. Lee to come home ; that something wonderful and extraordinary had occurred, and thus endeavored to prepare them for the reception of the wonderful truth ; for he feared the effect of a sudden disclosure upon Mrs. Lee, who was quite feeble.

"And now," said John, in conclusion, "what do you intend to do with that creature?" and he indicated Black.

"Come and help me first," was Philip's reply, "and after that we will know what to do."

So the two young men went to work with a will, and by the aid of John's bridle, which they contrived to fasten to the

handles of the old chest, they succeeded in lifting it from the grave, where it had so long lain buried.

"Quite a resurrection !" laughed John, as the chest was deposited upon the ground. "And now, what next?"

"Can you procure a conveyance any place near here?" queried Philip; "for, if you can, we will take our departure."

John hurried away, leaving Philip to guard the treasure and the prisoner, who lay audibly cursing his own folly. In a half-hour John returned with an ox team and wagon; the chest was deposited within it, and Gabriel Black, groaning and cursing—since resistance was useless—was lifted into the wagon also. Philip and John sprang in, and they drove off.

"Which way, Philip?" asked John, as the wagon rattled along.

"To the old Red Tavern !" replied Philip. "I have my own opinion of that den, and I'm going to attend to it the first thing on my list of old scores."

They proceeded at a tolerable pace, and reached the den of iniquity before noon. It chanced that a large number of the pine woods people had gathered there—some on business, for the old tavern "kept store" also; others had dropped in for their daily dose of "tanglefoot;" there was a goodly crowd upon the long, low gallery, as the ox-team passed before the house, and it was safe to presume that most of them were vigilantes. John and Philip alighted leisurely and advanced toward the host. Old Bill Corney took his pipe from his mouth, while his bleary eyes stared at Philip in blank amazement.

"Yes, Mr. Corney," said Philip, with a mock obeisance, "I am alive! You would hardly believe it now, would you? And—do you know—can you imagine what I am here for to-day?"

There was no response. The other men crowded around, and some significant glances were exchanged.

"I am here!" continued Philip, "to shoot down every vigilante among you!"

The effect of this announcement was electrical, and had the result that Philip had anticipated. By the general stampede, he knew, beyond a doubt, that every man there belonged to the brotherhood.

"Hold on!" cried Philip, sternly, seizing Black's rifle, and pointing it full at old Corney. "Flight will not save you! I know you now, and every man of you will be arrested before this week is out! There is *some* law in Louisiana, if it hasn't reached the pine woods!"

At that instant old Corney's ferret-like eyes fell upon Black in the bottom of the wagon. His red face paled.

"By Jingo, boys, the cap'n!" he ejaculated.

"Hold your tongue!" growled Black. "How dare you attempt to betray me?"

"Your connection with the gang of cut-throats known as the 'Pine Woods Vigilantes,' " said Philip, scornfully, "is already known, Gabriel Black! But——"

"Hang him up to the nearest pine tree!" cried a hoarse voice amid the crowd. "He put us up to it!"

"Your advice is very good, Cooper," remarked Philip, quietly; "and when we are done with him, we will try our hands on *you*! The partaker is as bad as the thief, you know!"

The man shrank away, like all of his sort, a coward.

Philip approached Gabriel Black.

"Look here!" he said, sternly. "I demand that you tell me what you have done with Jean Conway and her mother. If you will do so peaceably, I will agree that no personal violence shall be done you. I will have you sent to the parish prison to await your trial. But refuse to reveal the place where you have hidden those two friendless women whom you have persecuted, and——"

He paused.

"What will you do?" cried Black, anxiously.

"I will deliver you over to the tender mercies of those men whose captain you were, and let them string you up to the forked pine yonder!"

"I—I—I'll tell you anything!" groaned Black, trembling like an aspen. "I couldn't stand *that*!"

Philip smiled grimly.

"No; I suppose not," he said. "You are a coward to the very core, Gabriel Black! Well, go ahead, and make haste about it? Where are they?"

As Philip spoke, he chanced to raise his eyes. They fell upon a window in the rear of the old tavern, and he saw, pressed against the dingy pane, a pallid, wistful face, framed in by golden hair. With a low cry, he sprang forward and touched John Averill's shoulder.

"Stay here, John!" he panted, "and keep your eye on the iron chest and on this devil! I—I—oh, Heaven! Jean is up yonder!"

He dashed forward and entered the house. Old Corney's burly form barred his progress; but, with a well-directed blow, Philip laid him senseless and dashed on. Up a short flight of narrow stairs he flew, and paused at length before a stout door.

"Jean! Jean!" he cried, wildly, "I am here!"

His voice penetrated the thick walls, and Jean answered, despite the fact that Mrs. Corney was holding her in both arms, endeavoring to stifle her cries. Philip struck the door a thundering blow.

"Open!" he cried.

Mrs. Conway seemed endowed with sudden strength and resolution. Mild, and yielding, and passive as she was under ordinary circumstances, she became a very lioness when aroused. She sprang upon Mrs. Corney, and while she held the woman's brawny arms with all her strength, Jean plunged her hand into that lady's capacious pocket and extracted the key. A moment more the door was open, and Jean was in Philip's arms. For

a while they stood in a very trance of joy ; then she drew herself away.

“What is the matter, my darling ?” cried Philip, in alarm.

“You—you are *not* married, are you, Philip ?”

“Married, indeed ! No, I am not married, Jean !”

“But *she* is !” shrieked Mrs. Corney, recovering her breath and speech at the same time.

An awful horror fell upon Jean, blotting out all her joy. She sat down and buried her face in her hands. But Philip took her hand and led her down and out of the house, Mrs. Conway following closely. Once outside, they found quite a spirited scene taking place.

Gabriel Black lay upon the ground, pallid, half-frightened to death, and a woman was stooping over him with a revolver pointed at his heart.

“What does all this mean ?” cried Philip. “This man is my prisoner !”

The woman raised her head, and disclosed a pale, pretty face, but all lined with sorrow and suffering.

“I am Gabriel Black’s wife !” she said, slowly and distinctly. “My name is Mariette Black. He married me in St. Landry parish, ten years ago, and then deserted me. The marriage with Miss Conway was, of course, illegal, for I was living ; yes, I have lived when other women would have died ; lived to hunt him down. It was I who frightened him, knowing his cowardly nature ; it was I who conveyed the warnings, and I who attempted to aid Miss Conway and her mother to escape from his toils. And now that the day of retribution has come, I claim the right to punish him. I shall take his miserable life !”

She paused, and all eyes were turned upon the villain. Over his pale face a grayish hue had settled ; his eyes were open and staring straight before him. He was dead ; had actually died of fright.

* * * * *

Jean and Philip were married at once. Philip purchased

John Averill's old place, and there he and his bride, with her mother, took up their abode, while John and his wife, with the old folks, who had nearly died of joy at finding their loved one still spared to them, all dwell at the Lee Place.

The iron chest being opened, was found to contain a large sum of money in Spanish doubloons, and a casket of jewels, which were priceless. Very wealthy were Jean and her mother now, and they lavished their money in good and charitable actions. A large sum was expended in ridding the country of the terrible vigilantes. The band was broken up, the ringleaders punished, the old Red Tavern pulled down, and its timbers burned ; and the very name of vigilantes is no longer heard in the green and pleasant pine woods. Only to this day, sometimes, an aged dame (whose grandfather, perchance, belonged to the same organization), will frighten her grandchildren with wonderful tales of wild exploits committed by the pine woods vigilantes, and the wildest tale does not exceed the truth.

Some time in the untried future, when the strong arm of the law shall reach that lonely region, and "the wheat be divided from the tares," there will be no more desirable dwelling-place for those who love quiet, green fields and "pastures new," than the fair southern pine woods.

And there they live, those whose fortunes we have followed—happy, loving, and beloved, reaping the reward of good deeds and noble actions ; glad of the possession of the golden treasure, but conscious still that the love which has blessed their lives is of far more value than gold.

[THE END.]

A SEVERE THREAT.

CHAPTER I.

“I WILL SAVE YOU !”

“I believe I have lost my way !”

Howard Ashleigh paused irresolutely upon the road-side, and gazed about with bewildered eyes. A lonely stretch of forest, lying hushed and still under an English sky, a few miles outside a quaint old English town. Over in the west great dun-colored clouds piled one above the other, with a dull crimson streak piercing their hearts, like a fiery lance. Indescribably lonely, the scene, with the moaning and sighing through the tree-tops, foretelling a coming storm.

“Here I am ‘afoot and alone,’” mused the young man. “Heaven knows how many miles from Waltham, where I must take the train for London. Ah !” he added, eagerly, glancing about him, “this is fortunate ! There must be a human habitation near.” For he had caught a glimpse of a high brick wall, frowning and gloomy, evidently inclosing an expanse of an ill-kept, neglected garden.

As he stands there let me describe him. A slender, graceful man, a proud, dark face, gray eyes, full of slumberous fire, clear-cut features, wavy, dark hair, and a heavy, black mustache shading the short, haughty upper lip. An American by birth was Howard Ashleigh ; by profession a civil engineer.

“That stupid innkeeper,” he went on, impatiently, as he hurried toward the dilapidated gate which his quick glance had

discerned, "told me to keep to the right, and in two hours I would reach Waltham. The *right* was evidently the *wrong* in this instance. Well, I'll seek shelter here for to-night; it is getting late, and I don't like the looks of the sky over in the west yonder. It is going to storm, or I'm mistaken. I'll beg these people to keep me until morning, and then I'll be off for London and sweet Geraldine Vernon. What would she say, I wonder, if she knew that I have worn her picture over my heart for three long years! Beautiful Geraldine—'my lady Geraldine' we used to call her, in those old days of the past."

He had the gate open by this time, and was hurrying up the long avenue, neglected and strewn with dead leaves, toward the building which loomed in the background. A great, gray, ruinous pile, covered with clambering ivy, and with decay and desolation stamped plainly upon it. He hesitated a moment, and his eyes wandered over the front of the gloomy old mansion.

"Looks deserted," he muttered; "but no, there is smoke issuing from the chimney, and——"

He paused abruptly, and a look of incredulous wonder dawned in his eyes. For peering at him from an upper window, plainly discernible, was a woman's face—a beautiful face, with a cloud of tangled golden hair falling over graceful shoulders. Only an instant, and then the vision vanished. The young man stood as though riveted to the spot, his gaze fixed upon that closed window; one hand sought his breast and touched the portrait hidden there.

"Impossible!" he muttered, incredulously, "quite impossible; and yet—my God! how like her it is!"

He was recalled to his senses by a sharp lightning flash, followed by the low rumbling of sullen thunder in the distance. He ascended the steps of the broad veranda and rapped loudly at the great weather-stained door.

A long pause intervened, broken only by the roll of thunder, nearer now, while sharp streaks of lightning began to come and go in the black sky. Then the sound of shuffling footsteps

within, followed by a rattling of bolts and chains (the house was evidently well secured), the great door swung slowly open, and the young man saw before him an immense wainscoted hall, and confronting him on the threshold a hideous old woman, sullen and wrinkled. She drew back in undisguised alarm as her eyes fell upon the stranger.

"I thought it was the master!" she muttered, making a movement to close the door in the young man's face.

He lifted his hat.

"I have lost my way," he began, in his frank, straightforward manner; "night is coming down, and there is a storm brewing; can I obtain shelter here for the night?"

The old crone's ugly face grew harsher.

"No, you can't!" she answered, shortly. "My orders is, admit no one! So, young man, you can just tramp on again; it ain't but five miles from here to Waltham, after you leave this gate, and you'll soon——"

"He shall stay!"

The old woman started, with a suppressed groan, and Howard Ashleigh turned in astonishment, to see an unexpected apparition. Down the long, carved, oaken staircase, slippery as glass, which wound its sinuous way up from the center of the great, black entrance-hall, glided the slim, graceful figure of a girl—the face which he had seen at the window above; and again the conviction stole over him that her face was like the pictured one which lay upon his breast. A pale, little face, with great black eyes, the cloud of yellow hair contrasting strangely with their lustrous darkness; and upon every feature the traces of pride, passion, and impatience plainly visible. He bowed with courteous grace.

"I should esteem it a great favor," he said, "but I have no desire to intrude or inconvenience."

"Come in!" she interrupted. "It is going to rain. We have fearful storms here sometimes. Judith, lead the way."

And she turned to the old woman, who was standing in

dogged silence, her bleared, angry eyes upon the young man's handsome face.

"Miss Geraldine!" she expostulated, in a tone of half command, half entreaty, "your father will kill you if you admit this—this—stranger."

The girl's haughty little head was crested proudly, and her eyes flashed with superb disdain.

"Do as I bid you!" she commanded; then, in a significant tone, she added, "the door is open; you could not prevent me if I chose to leave, and who would suffer *then*, you or I?"

Old Edith shrugged her shoulders, but made no reply, while Howard Ashleigh stood waiting for this strange scene to terminate.

"Come in, sir," repeated the girl. "You are quite welcome to such poor hospitality as we can proffer you."

She paused, and a sudden gleam lit up her small, pale face; then added, ere he could frame an answer:

"I see that you have forgotten me; but I remember you well, Mr. Ashleigh."

He started, as with an electric shock.

"Good heavens!" he ejaculated, in amazement, "then I was *not* mistaken. It is really Miss Vernon!"

"Lloyd Vernon's sister," the girl returned, calmly. "I recognized you immediately, Mr. Ashleigh, although it is three years since we have met."

She held out her hand as she spoke—a slim, white hand, upon which gleamed a great, uncanny opal. Howard Ashleigh pressed it warmly, while old Judith glowered upon them with eyes full of sullen defiance.

"I never thought to find you *here*!" he said, in a tone of deep surprise, as he followed his young hostess into the great, bare hall, showing its hundred years in the decay, neglect, ruin, which stared him in the face. She threw open a door on the left, disclosing an immensely gloomy apartment, ill-furnished, but with a cheerful wood fire blazing and crackling in the

yawning cavern of a fire-place, redeeming the room from utter discomfort.

Geraldine Vernon leaned against the broad, black marble mantel, and her dark eyes sought Howard Ashleigh's face.

"I knew you at once," she repeated, ignoring his former remark. "Lloyd has written so much about you since you were with us, three years ago, and he sent me your picture. I have it here."

And, with a pretty blush, she turned to a small carved ebony bracket, upon which stood a cabinet photograph of the young man, surprisingly life-like.

"It is your second self, you see," she went on, with timid grace; "and Lloyd wrote me that you had left him and gone to England on business. I am proud to think that my brother, reared as he has been, has the energy to go forth in the world to make a place for himself; but it is dreadful to be parted from him."

She paused, and suddenly bowing her head upon the mantel, burst into a flood of bitter tears.

Astonished and alarmed, Howard hastened to her side.

"Geraldine—Miss Vernon!" he cried: "what is the matter? Why are you here in this isolated place? Can I help you?"

She raised her tear-stained face, and the shining drops dried quickly in her beautiful eyes.

"No," she answered coldly; "no one can help me. You must think me very strange," she added, quietly, "but I could control myself no longer. Mr. Ashleigh, you are my brother's friend. I will tell you all. *I am a prisoner here!* The windows of this house are all nailed fast on the outside; the outer doors are always locked, and old Judith carries the keys. I have been shut up in this dreary place for nearly a year."

"Great heavens!"

She checked him with an imperious gesture.

"My brother does not know, of course," she went on

quickly. "His letters are addressed to our house in London, where he believes me to be ; they are forwarded to me at this place, and mine to him are read, revised, and mailed to him from London. Far away in America, he does not dream that his only sister—his motherless sister—is the victim of a father's cruelty."

"Miss Vernon !"

"It is a matter of resistance. Let me explain. My father swears that I shall marry a certain nobleman, Sir John Sydney by name, and I swear that I will die first. It is the clashing of two strong wills, you see," and she smiled bitterly, but it was like a gleam of wintry sunshine on her small, pale face. "Mr. Ashleigh, I hate that man," she went on, panting and breathless, her eyes shining ; "I hate Sir John Sydney—*hate him*—HATE him ! I would die a thousand deaths before I would consent to marry him, mean, cruel, relentless tyrant that he is ! I am only eighteen," she went on, wringing her white hands piteously, "and he is past fifty ! Yet my father determined that I should be Lady Sydney, and finding that I would not consent, has made me a prisoner here ; and here I am to remain, he says, until I come to my senses. I shall be a very old woman when that day dawns," she added, bitterly, "if to be sensible means to marry Sir John Sydney."

Her beautiful eyes flashed proudly ; her pale face wore a crimson spot on either delicate cheek ; her slender form was drawn up erect and haughty ; and the two white hands were uplifted with a tragic gesture worthy of Rachel.

Howard Ashleigh gazed upon her beautiful face with his heart in his eyes. All the fervor and passion of his Southern nature was a-thrill at sight of this beautiful girl, so hardly dealt with, and he longed to tell her the truth—how he had come from a distant home with a hope dawning in his breast to win her for his wife. That strange incipient madness called love had grown up in his heart like some rare tropical plant, in the long years which had passed since they had met. Many a night, when he

and Lloyd Vernon had lain out under the twinkling stars; comrades together, sharing the same tent, in their rough life engineering amid wild scenes, they had spoken of *her*; for, far away in America, Vernon dreamed not of all that was transpiring at home; and it was the dearest wish of his heart that Howard Ashleigh should win his sister's affection.

The recollection of the hopes which had come to Ashleigh overpowered him now. He caught the girl's two hands in his and bent his handsome head to gaze into her slumberous eyes. Old Judith had slipped away from the room, and they were alone.

"Geraldine," he panted, breathlessly, "I will save you from the fate before you, if you will let me! I have never forgotten you; I have always loved you! See! I have worn this above my heart since last we met!"

He drew forth a diamond-studded locket, and opening it, disclosed to Geraldine her own face. She averted her head to hide the crimson blushes, and she trembled visibly.

"Speak, darling!" he implored. "Tell me that you forgive my presumption; for, oh, Geraldine, I love you so! And I will save you from the fate that awaits you, if you will only consent."

"How?" she faltered.

"Marry me at once!" he went on, eagerly. "Give me the right to defend you, and no one can ever harm you again. I am not rich—that is true—but once my wife, and away in our own free land, where there is room for every man of energy and perseverance, you shall be cared for. If you consent, my darling," he went on, quickly, "we will go over to Scotland, and be married immediately. They dispense with all senseless formality there. I would not counsel you against your father's wishes; but the necessity of the case demands stringent measures. Tell me, Geraldine—can you care for me?"

The golden head drooped against his shoulder.

"I *do* care!" she said, shyly. "We have both learned to

care, it seems, though we have been parted so long ! I trust you, Howard, implicitly. Let it be as you will."

The last words were very faint ; but they reached the lover's ears. He caught her in his arms, and kissed the sweet, red lips.

"God bless you !" he murmured, fervently.

Suddenly, upon the silence there came the rumble of carriage wheels, and a bustle in the hall without ; then the sound of a loud, imperious voice, in a tone of command.

Geraldine sprang from her lover's embrace, and clasping her hands, gazed into his face with her dark eyes full of despair.

"God help me !" she moaned. "My father has come. What shall I do ? Oh ! what shall I do ?"

There was the sound of heavy footsteps in the hall. Geraldine seized Howard's hand and led him away to the farthest end of the immense room, lighted only by the firelight.

"Stay here," she whispered ; "and no matter what you hear, don't betray yourself. He may not see you, and it is your only chance, if you would help me to escape."

There was a tall, old-fashioned cabinet in the gloomy corner. Howard stepped into its shadow, and prepared for what was to come ; and Geraldine Vernon, pale and resolute, paused before the door of the room, to face her angry father.

CHAPTER II.

HIS WIFE.

"Geraldine !"

The cameo-like face flushed for an instant, and then grew pale as death again, as a tall, haughty old man strode into the room, and confronted her. His face, very like her own, was deadly pale, his eyes stern.

"Well, sir !" she returned.

"What is this ?" he demanded, fiercely. "Old Judith tells

me that a stranger has been admitted here! How *dare* you disobey my express commands, and fraternize with the first tramp that happens to stroll this way? A good thing for him, whoever he may be, that he has taken himself off."

She flashed her proud eyes upon his harsh face.

"And, how dare *you* make a prisoner of your own daughter?" she cried, haughtily. "Lionel Vernon, if you think to bend my will to your purpose, you are only wasting time. I am a Vernon, and the Vernons are not easy to conquer or coerce. We are said to be a proud race; and I have never heard of dishonor attached to our name—until now!"

He started angrily.

"Do you mean me?" he cried.

She met his gaze with eyes that never flinched.

"I mean *you*!" she returned, slowly. "Father, do you see no dishonor in this thing that you would have me to do? 'This marriage, for the sake of wealth and position—and——'"

He checked her with an angry gesture.

"Stop!" he commanded, sternly. "Since you are so insolent, I will spare you no longer. I have mercifully concealed from you the real reason why this marriage must take place. There is a secret in our family, Geraldine—a guilty secret. It is in the hands of Sir John Sydney. If you consent to marry him, you will be Lady Sydney, with limitless wealth at your command; but, if you refuse"—he gazed comprehensively into the girl's white, drawn face—"you bring ruin upon your own name. Sir John has agreed to save us from ignominy and lasting disgrace—he has promised to do it, the price being your hand in marriage."

"A fearful price!" she panted. "Father,"—she folded her arms upon her breast, and confronted him, her face like marble, her eyes shining like stars—"he who sins must pay the penalty. I ask not who is the criminal, or what his crime; I only know that the innocent should not always suffer for the guilty, and I

decline to pay the part of 'scapegoat' for the Vernon race. Let Sir John Sydney do his worst ; I will never, never be his wife !"

Lionel Vernon advanced toward his daughter, his face livid with rage. For a moment he seemed tempted to strike her down at his feet. He lifted one hand ; then it fell at his side ; and he turned toward the door ; then he paused.

"Go to your own room !" he hissed, wrathfully, "and do not let me see your face until morning. When to-morrow dawns you leave here with me. I will take you to London, and you shall be Lady Sydney within four-and-twenty hours."

He strode from the apartment, too angry to glance back, and left his daughter pale and trembling—alone. Quick as a flash she darted to the corner, where Howard Ashleigh was concealed, frenzied at thought of the insults heaped upon the girl by her brutal father.

"Come," she panted, "we have no time to lose. Did you hear, Howard ? I am to be Lady Sydney in four-and-twenty hours ! I will die first !"

He caught her in his arms.

"You will be my wife," he whispered, softly. "Go darling, and make whatever preparation may be necessary ; then return to this room, where I will await you. I trust we will be on our way to Scotland before morning dawns. I have thought of a plan."

She never stopped to question ; she left the room, and with cautious footsteps, crept up stairs to her own chamber, returning shortly with a small valise in her hand.

"I am ready," she whispered. "Everything is in darkness. Evidently, old Judith thinks that you are gone ; or else she is willing for you to find shelter in this great dungeon of a house, knowing that morning would reveal the truth to my father. But Howard, tell me, how can we escape ? Every window in the house is nailed fast outside ; the doors are all locked, and the keys in Judith's possession ; she sleeps with them under her pillow."

"Love laughs at locksmiths," he quoted, sententiously.

Then he drew from his pocket a bit of strong wire, curiously bent, and held it up in the flickering firelight.

"Do you see that?" he asked. "I have never seen a lock that I could not open with ingenuity and a piece of wire. If only they do not awaken, I think we will escape, Geraldine. Hark! what is that?"

Roaring and howling, the tempest long threatened was upon them at last, tearing through the tall tree-tops, tossing their branches wildly with a moaning sound. With a frightened cry Geraldine clung to her lover's arm.

"It is a fearful night!" she whispered, in an awe-struck tone.

"So much the better for us," returned Howard, "for the noise of the storm will cover our departure. I will go to work at once on the outer door. If I succeed, I will summon you."

He stepped noiselessly into the hall, and Geraldine stood with her hand pressed upon her wildly throbbing heart, and listened eagerly. No sound reached her ears save "the wind at his prayers." Up stairs in the great house silence and darkness reigned.

Old Judith had not troubled herself in regard to the intruder. Her master having arrived, she had given all authority into his hands, and had retired to her own couch, after imbibing freely from the little squat tea-pot full of young hyson, with a strong infusion of old cognac to keep it warm. She had told Lionel Vernon simply of Howard's intrusion, but had neglected to add that he was still in the house, for she stood in wholesome awe of her master's anger; while Vernon himself, fondly believing that his daughter had retired, as he had bidden her, was sleeping soundly after the fatigue of his journey; and it thus happened that Howard had everything his own way.

Geraldine stood panting and breathless in the great room, trying to still the wild tumult in her breast. The fire was dying out now, and fitful shadows danced in the corners. The mo-

ments like ages wore away, and at last the door was pushed open stealthily, and Howard's cautious voice whispered :

“Come!”

With a prayer for help and guidance in her heart, Geraldine Vernon followed him into the gloomy hall-way through the open outer door, and stood trembling and agitated upon the wind-swept porch.

The tempest howled and shrieked around them, and a great tree standing down the avenue was torn up by the roots, whirled in the wind a little, and fell with a loud crash to the ground. Shuddering violently, Geraldine threw her arms about her lover's neck.

“A bad omen,” she whispered, “a bad omen, but I would rather die than go back!”

Half an hour later, Lionel Vernon's own carriage went tearing down the long country road through the storm and darkness—the horses instinctively taking the right direction—on to the railroad station; its occupants, Howard and Geraldine. Their destination reached and the train boarded—fortunately they had not long to wait—away they flew through the night and the darkness, and the curtain was rung up upon the first act in the strange tragedy before them.

* * * * *

The sun was going down—a lurid ball of fire—in the gloomy west, and there was an unpleasant chill in the air. The few passengers in the waiting-room at a certain way-side station in a remote corner of Scotland, drew their wraps closer about their shoulders, while their faces looked pinched and blue in the cold atmosphere.

In an obscure corner a tall man sat, his hat slouched over his eyes, and a long cloak covering him from head to foot, watching the door of the waiting-room furtively, but with eager, earnest gaze. It opened, suddenly, and two people entered—Geraldine and her husband, for the marriage ceremony had

been said over them not two hours before. The worst was over, they congratulated themselves, as Howard hastened to procure tickets for the nearest seaport town, eager and anxious to start, for they longed to put the ocean between them and the cruel old man who would tear them asunder.

"All ready!" he said, as, having secured the tickets, he came to Geraldine's side. "Thank God, little wife, everything has succeeded. We are safe at last, and no one can ever separate us—never on earth!"

He paused aghast, as a low cry issued from Geraldine's lips. The man in the corner had arisen now, and, striding forward, confronted them in grim silence. Geraldine threw up both hands with a wordless moan, for there before them, stern and awful, stood her father, Lionel Vernon!

CHAPTER III.

HOWARD'S ARREST.

For a moment they stood there facing each other in dead silence; then the old man came forward, and with a grim smile, laid his hand on the girl's arm.

"Geraldine," he said, quietly, "where are you going?"

She gazed back into his face with equal composure.

"I was about to embark for America with my husband," she answered, calmly.

"Your what?"

The question was put very tranquilly. There was not a vestige of discernible anger in Lionel Vernon's imperturbable countenance. His daughter faced him with cool determination.

"You have not followed me here, father," she returned, calmly, "without being aware that I am not alone? I have taken my future into my own hands, and Howard Ashleigh is

my husband. Forgive me, father!" and she clasped her hands imploringly. "Pardon my undutiful conduct. I am convinced that the day will come when you will acknowledge that I am in the right!"

"Forgive you? Oh, yes!" he returned, with that same ominous quiet. "Come, Geraldine."

She gazed into his face with wondering surprise.

"Where?" she gasped.

"Home," returned Vernon, coolly. "Of course you will accompany me? Your marriage amounts to nothing; Scotch marriages are not legal in England, and——"

"That is a mistake, sir!" cried Howard, no longer able to maintain silence; "the ceremony just performed is legal anywhere in the world! Geraldine is my wife, and as such I claim her."

Lionel Vernon glanced at the young man with angry contempt.

"I don't know you, sir," he returned, haughtily; "but I would thank you to attend to your own affairs. Geraldine, the train is about to start; make haste, my daughter, or we shall miss it."

He attempted to take the girl's trembling hand, but she shrank away to Howard's side and confronted her father with calm disdain.

"Howard Ashleigh is my husband, sir!" she said, proudly. "You cannot separate husband and wife!"

Livid with fearful anger, the old man turned and beckoned to a couple of men who were standing in a corner of the waiting-room, watching the scene quietly. They were in citizens' dress, but as they drew near in answer to the summons of Vernon, they simultaneously displayed the shining badges which betrayed their office.

"This is the man!" said Vernon, indicating Howard as he spoke. "This is the culprit whom you seek. I demand his arrest on the charge of embezzlement. Officers, do your duty!"

With a low moan of horror and despair, Geraldine darted forward as though to throw her arms about her husband, but her father's strong hand detained her, and she paused, panting and breathless.

One of the officers dropped his hand on Howard's shoulder ; he struck it down with stinging contempt.

"Don't dare to touch me," he panted, "or murder will be done here !"

In a twinkling both officers sprang upon the young man, overpowered him, and the "bracelets" were upon his wrists. Geraldine, in a death-like swoon lying in her father's arms, knew nothing of the occurrence, and the officers dragged the young husband away—pallid, agonized, heart-broken ; not knowing what might happen ere he should be free again to claim his wife through the strong hands of the law.

It was an easy matter for Lionel Vernon to carry his unconscious daughter on board the train, which did not start for several minutes ; and leaving the place, they were borne away as fast as steam could carry them. Once more in England, Geraldine awoke from the long stupor which had followed that death-like swoon, and began to realize the horror of her own position.

One day in early winter, with the light snow lying like a down blanket over the bare, brown earth, Geraldine entered the gates of her former prison, and was lead up to the broad, wind-swept walk to the dismal old house ; its doors closed behind her with a clang, and she was a prisoner once more.

The days came and went—came and went with slow, leaden feet ; winter had died and fair, sweet spring had been born, when one day Lionel Vernon suddenly appeared at the old house. Geraldine was sitting at an open window, for she had grown so weak and frail that it was no longer deemed necessary to cage her like a bird. She was very pale and delicate, in a dress of snowy cashmere, her thin hands lying on her lap, her great, dark eyes fixed upon the landscape without. When she had come back to this dreary prison the brown earth was lying

hushed and still under its snowy cover, and now the violets were beginning to peep through the mold. She raised her eyes at last and saw her father standing before her.

"Geraldine," he said, and his tone was less harsh than usual, "are you ready to obey me?"

She started, as though awakened from a dream.

"Obey you?" she repeated, calmly; "what do you mean?"

"I mean this. Are you ready to become Lady Sydney?"

She arose from her seat, her pale face aglow with scorn and indignation, one slight hand uplifted, frail and white.

"Father," she faltered, but her voice was full of sternness, "I am Howard Ashleigh's wife."

"Howard Ashleigh's wife!" repeated the old man, with a wicked sneer; "I thought that folly was ended; besides, even granted that the marriage was aught but the farce it was, Howard Ashleigh is dead."

She did not faint; she did not shriek aloud or cry out in her mortal agony; she stood before that cruel old man like some wild creature that had received its death-wound, yet still faces its pursuer with eyes full of pitiful entreaty. But there was no pity, no mercy, in Lionel Vernon's heart.

"Yes," he went on, slowly, "Howard Ashleigh is dead, and he ought to have died long ago, before he ever crossed your path. See!"

He laid a folded newspaper before her, and pointed to a marked paragraph.

With a slow horror stealing over her heart, Geraldine deciphered these words:

"DIED.—Suddenly, in Glasgow, Scotland, Nov. 1, Mr. Howard Ashleigh, a native of South Carolina, U. S. A., aged 27 years."

When she glanced up from that fatal paragraph, she was all alone in the room, and night was slowly creeping over all things. She crouched in a corner of the couch upon which she had fallen in the first horror of that awful blow, and cowered

down in dull despair. Dead ! . The man she loved, whom she had always loved since their first meeting three years before ; the man who was her husband ; dead all these weary months, while she had been breaking her heart because she heard no word from him since she had been torn from his side at the little railway station in Scotland. He was dead ! And she—what mattered it, after all, what became of her now !

A light touch on her shoulder aroused her ; glancing up, she saw that her father had returned to her side.

“Geraldine,” he said, “John Sydney has arrived, and with him a clergyman. All necessary forms have been complied with, and since all is in readiness, you will obey me, and consent to be married quietly?”

She stared vacantly before her, but she had no words to utter.

“Geraldine !”

The word was like a groan. Her father, haughty Lionel Vernon, was upon his knees now at his daughter’s feet.

“My child !” he went on, wringing his hands in wild desperation, “I have told you of a guilty secret in our family. I did not tell you all. I thought to spare you, in mercy. But listen, Geraldine : *I am the guilty wretch* who has brought disgrace upon our fair name. Sir John Sydney can and will lift the cloud of shame from our escutcheon, and the world need never know the truth if you will only consent to be his wife. He knows how you dislike him, it is true, but I have scrupulously concealed from him your—your foolish fancy for young Ashleigh ; and believing that, though you do not care for himself, your heart is still free, he will make you Lady Sydney, and save us from a dreadful fate. Geraldine, it lies in your hands. Will you avert disgrace and ruin from the Vernon name ? Will you save your unhappy father from a felon’s doom ?”

She listened as one in a dream. Outside the open door the great entrance hall shone brilliantly with a brave array of lamps down its long vista. Geraldine’s dull gaze caught a glimpse of the tall, spare figure of an elderly man, with coarse, red face,

low, retreating brow, and eyes like a ferret's; a heavy, gray beard and mustache, with overhanging brows of the same hue—Sir John Sydney.

She caught her breath hard, like one in mortal pain. Into her face there crept a look of desperate horror. Then slowly she lifted her heavy eyes, and signed her own death-sentence.

“I will obey you, father,” she said, in a low, stern, unnatural tone, “because you *are* my father, though, Heaven knows, you have never been as one to me. I will consent to marry this man whom I hate—*hate*, do you understand?”

“But, so help me Heaven! he shall rue the day that he made me his unloving wife—I, who hold naught in my heart for him but bitter hatred! His future shall be one long scene of unhappiness. I swear to do all in my power to render him miserable. I will pass my life in plotting against his peace, his happiness, his very existence! Living, I will be to him a continual reproach and torture; dying, I will come back from the tomb to haunt him!”

“No threat is too severe for the dastardly coward who has instigated this unmanly persecution, and who would drag a heart-broken woman into an unholy marriage. This is no idle threat. I have registered it in my heart, and, so help me Heaven, I will keep it to the bitter end!”

A footfall sounded on the bare floor; she raised her eyes, and a low moan of horror and anguish escaped her white lips.

CHAPTER IV.

SEVEN DAYS' GRACE.

The cry was frozen upon Geraldine's lips as her eyes fell upon the hated face of Sir John Sydney. He had grown tired of waiting for Lionel Vernon to report the progress of affairs, and had ventured into the young girl's presence. She put out her hands with a gesture of loathing.

“Keep away!” she faltered. “Don’t dare trouble me now. I——”

But her father caught her arm, with a warning gesture.

“Geraldine,” he cried, commandingly, “you are beside yourself. Come in, Sir John. My daughter is not well, and is nervous and excited. Your unexpected coming has alarmed her somewhat.”

But she broke from her father’s detaining grasp, and darting forward, paused before the baronet, her eyes shining with the fires of unquenchable hatred, her breath coming pantingly, her small hands clutched convulsively.

“I *will* speak,” she panted; “father, I demand the right. You shall not prevent my telling this man—this *wretch*”—and she ground the word out fiercely between her small, white teeth, “in what utter contempt I hold him; how thoroughly I despise and hate him. If I were to see him at this moment down in the dust at my feet, writhing in the pangs from which I might free him by the lifting of a hand, I would pray that my hand should be stricken powerless forever ere I would lift it for his relief. And now, Sir John Sydney, knowing my true estimate of your character, I ask you, do you still wish me to be your wife?”

Speaking from the fullness of her disgust and aversion, acting as most impulsive, passionate natures would have acted, Geraldine Vernon had yet made a grand mistake. Sir John was of a tenacious nature. He had fallen desperately in love with the bright, beautiful, audacious girl; the idea had taken possession of him that she, with her bewildering beauty and strange fascination, would prove a Lady Sydney of whom he might be proud; and he had determined to win her by fair means or foul. He was, as I have said, remarkably tenacious by nature, and all this opposition on her part but served to strengthen his wild passion. He was a bad man to the very core of his hard heart. No deed was too dark for him to attempt when aught stood in the way of the gratification of his selfish wishes. Gaz-

ing upon the proud, haughty face of the girl before him, Sir John felt the sluggish blood leap madly in his veins. More beautiful in her anger and contempt than he had ever seen her, the baronet registered a vow within his heart to make this girl his own, though it cost him his life. It was a mad, unreasoning passion, and for the time swept over his entire nature like a flood tide, carrying every other consideration before it. He gazed into Geraldine's white face with eyes full of ominous fire.

"Your wild words only serve to strengthen my resolution, Miss Vernon," he said, decidedly. "I see now what a spirited Lady Sydney you will make. And how I shall delight in clipping my lady's wings," he muttered, aside.

With a haughty gesture, Geraldine swept past him toward the door. The baronet strode forward, and extended one arm, as though to bar her passage from the room.

"Stop, my Lady Disdain!" he cried. "I demand my answer now. Is the marriage to take place at once, this very hour, or am I to wait another year? Be careful, my dear; my patience is not without limit."

She paused and faced him quietly, gazing straight into his face, with haughty, defiant eyes. She had decided to comply with her father's command, and take this step which would render her own life a howling wilderness; for her father's sake, that he might not be deprived of liberty—life, perhaps. But she could not—*could not* do it now, when her heart lay crushed and bleeding beneath the weight of the awful blow which had fallen upon it—the news of Howard Ashleigh's death. No! though they killed her, they *should not* drag her, a heart-broken widow, to the altar, within the very hour upon which the awful tidings had reached her. She struck her clenched hands together with a fierce gesture, and turned her blazing eyes upon the wretch who awaited her reply.

"No, sir," she returned, contemptuously, "you shall not compel me to comply with your wicked proposition now. No

—no, a thousand times, no ! You have heard the words which I spoke to my father ; you know, therefore, what to expect when you make Geraldine Vernon your wife. Since you invite your doom, the consequences be upon your own head. No, Sir John Sydney, the unholy sacrifice must not be—*shall* not be now !”

Sir John gave the girl a comprehensive glance, and his eyes wore an ugly expression.

“ One week from to-day,” he returned, coldly, “ I will meet you in London ; your father will bring you thither. The wedding will be solemnized at once, at St. George’s, and Lionel Vernon’s guilty secret will be safe. Do you understand me, Geraldine ?”

She shuddered visibly.

“ Yes, I understand you. The sacrifice shall take place, and the victim will not be wanting. But woe to you, Sir John Sydney ! You shall live to remember this hour, and look back upon it with the keenest regret that the human heart can know ! As sure as you stand there I will pay you off inch by inch for all the wrongs you have inflicted upon me. Beware, Sir John Sydney !”

He bent his head in mock obeisance.

“ One week from to-day,” was his significant answer. “ Attempt to retract or escape me and your father swings from the scaffold !”

He left the room with heavy tread, and directly afterward, down the avenue which led from the house the rumble of carriage wheels announced his departure.

Geraldine stood listening to the echo of his footfall as he passed from the house. As the rattle of wheels fell upon her ear she drew a long breath of relief as though a heavy incubus had been lifted from her heart.

She had gained one week of grace—seven days’ respite !

CHAPTER V.

A DEED OF DARKNESS.

The carriage which contained Sir John and the clergyman went straight back to Waltham. Here the reverend gentleman alighted, and the carriage with its single occupant went flying through the streets of the quaint old town, on toward the green country on the other side. Here the baronet alighted and bade the man await his return at a tiny inn near by, promising to be back in an hour.

Once alone, Sir John turned to the left and plunged into a lonely lane. On he went for some distance, pausing at length, abruptly, as the faint gleam of lamp-light fell athwart the pathway.

“Curse the fool!” he muttered, angrily. “Why on earth does she illuminate the place? Some one chancing along here will find the nest hidden away in the green lane, and *then*!”

He gnawed his grizzled mustache furiously, without finishing the sentence, and there was a threatening expression on his face.

As he hurried on, the clouds began to cover the sky, and the pure-eyed stars shining down serenely were hidden from sight; while a black, angry wall of cloud heaped up in the sullen west, began to send forth defiant mutterings.

With a fearful imprecation on the coming storm, the baronet passed on through the blossoming hedge rows, looking neither to the right nor left. A low fence arose before him, intercepting the road. He cleared it with a single bound, and in a moment more he paused before a tiny, thatched cottage, half concealed by clustering woodbine. A low rap upon the door, a significant summons; there was the sound of a suppressed

exclamation within ; then soft footsteps approached the door, and a voice demanded, cautiously :

“ Who’s there ? ”

“ John ! ” answered the baronet, through the keyhole.

Then the door swung slowly open and he strode over the threshold. A bit of a cot, three tiny rooms, but neatly and even handsomely furnished. There was a handful of fire burning in the diminutive grate, and a round table stood before it, laden with books and flowers—in the center a handsome lamp. The floor was covered with matting, there were a few good pictures on the gray-tinted walls, the windows were draped in muslin, there was a cottage piano, and a gilt cage with a yellow canary, like a puff of down, sound asleep on its perch, with its head tucked under its wing.

Sir John closed and locked the door behind him, and advanced to the fire, pausing upon the velvet hearth-rug to look down upon the woman before him. The dark beauty of the Andalusian ; eyes of a lustrous darkness, and hair like black satin ; a complexion of cream and roses—a very beautiful woman !

As she stood there gazing up into his face, hard, ugly though it was (they looked like beauty and the beast standing there together), it was easy to see that this woman—inexplicable as it appeared—*loved* the man before her with all her heart and soul. A woman no longer in her first youth, but with much of its beauty and fervor lingering still about her.

“ It is so long since I have seen you, John ! ” she said, laying her smooth cheek against his shoulder. “ And Lola is away from home ; I am *so* sorry ! I let her go to Waltham with old Zingra ; for there is to be a grand ball at one of the big houses to-night, and they wanted Lola to sing. You are not angry, dear ? Zingra will take good care of her, and we needed the money so much, for they promised to pay well.”

She laid one little hand upon his, but he shook off her slight touch, roughly, as though it hurt him, and turning his back to-

ward the fire, he folded his arms upon his breast, and gazed down into her face with pitiless eyes.

“Stella,” he began, abruptly, after a moment’s silence, “are you sorry that you married me?”

All the dark, rich beauty of her face lit up with a crimson glow. She shook her head slowly.

“I loved you,” she cried, “and I always believed that you were happy with me, until you left me with my child in sunny France and came to this country. I waited years for your return—what was life without *you*? The money that you sent me was not a substitute for your presence, and so, a few months ago, unable longer to endure the separation, I followed you here, guided by the postmark on your letters to me. I found you; but, alas! you are as much a stranger to me as though I were in a distant land. In obedience to your command, I have secluded myself in this lonely place; but I am tired of hiding like a criminal from justice. I am willing to share your poverty, dear, and your station in life, whatever it may be. Besides, Lola is eighteen now, and I cannot always keep her concealed. She is very beautiful. John, you need not be ashamed of your wife and child!”

How perfect she was, with her earnest eyes upon his face. To her there was no lack of grace or beauty in the man before her—for she loved him. Woman-like, she invested him with the attributes of a god, and fell down before the clay image which she had exalted. This man, devoid of beauty, was nevertheless extremely fascinating when he chose to be. He struck his talons in the heart of this woman, Stella Gilroy, and she believed him little less than an angel. True, he had neglected her for years, but she had always been ready with an excuse for his delinquency when he returned to her; and even now she forgave his harshness, woman-like, because he *had* come back, you see.

For a time he stood in moody silence. Stella ventured to make one more attempt at conciliation. It was evident that

there was something on his mind, and she longed with all her heart to help and sympathize with him.

“How is business now, dear?” she queried, presently. “Have you any portraits to paint?”

“Beastly!” he growled, seeming to enjoy the shameful deception which he was practicing upon her. “Not an order has come in for weeks. Stella, portrait painting is not to be depended upon when a man is a poor, untitled beggar.”

“If you could only get a start in the world,” she sighed, “all would be well, I am sure. Why should not the name of John Gordon be enrolled among the successful artists of the day? Why not try to gain the patronage of the titled and great—Sir John Sydney, for instance, of Sydney House? He has just returned, I am told, from a long absence in other lands, and is reputed to be a collector of paintings, and a judge of their merits.”

The pseudo John Gordon started, and grew deadly pale. He glanced at her suspiciously.

“Who told you that?” he demanded, angrily. “Have you *dared* to disobey me, Stella?”

She returned the glance deprecatingly, reproachfully.

“No, no!” she cried, quickly; “I have not disobeyed you. I do not go out. Indeed, I keep in strict retirement here, as you ordered. But old Zingra hears the village gossip when she is obliged to go to Waltham, once a week, for supplies. She says it is reported in the village that Sir John Sydney is soon to marry, and that there is to be a grand wedding. Why, John, what *is* the matter?”

For the baronet recoiled as though he had been struck, and his ruddy face grew slowly pallid. He made no reply, but wheeling suddenly about, gazed into the dying fire.

“Stella,” he observed, at length, his tone changing to one of tenderness, “you have our—our marriage certificate, have you not, darling?”

She flushed with delight at sound of the affectionate epithet.

Woman-like, the first endearing word brought her to her feet again. She crossed the room quickly, and opening her escritoire, took thence a folded paper, and laid it in his hand.

Sir John opened it slowly, and glanced over the lines which told to the world that *John Gordon* and *Stella Gilroy* had been united in marriage, in a certain retired hamlet in England, just nineteen years before, when *Stella Gilroy* was eighteen, and care-free.

Sir John read the document slowly, his eyes gleaming with Satanic delight ; then he turned deliberately, and tossed it upon the bed of still smoldering coals in the grate.

Stella sprang forward, and caught his arm. Her face was drawn and ashen white.

“My marriage lines!” she panted, breathlessly. “Good God, John, what have you done? Don’t you know it might ruin me? And *Lola*; think of your child, John—our little *Lola*!”

But, alas! it was too late. There was a flash, a flicker of rosy flame shooting upward, and the paper lay before her horror-stricken gaze, a heap of gray, feathery ashes.

With a low moan of agony she turned and confronted him. All tenderness had vanished now ; all love had died out of her heart. “Even the worm will turn,” and *Stella Gordon*’s hour had come at last.

“What do you mean?” she gasped, and the expression of her eyes boded him no good.

But he met her gaze boldly.

“I mean this!” he answered, cuttingly. “I have taken from your keeping the only proof in existence that you are my wife. I was tired of you long ago—horribly tired ; and—I am done with you forever. Besides, listen, *Stella* ; I am *not* *John Gordon*, the poor, strolling artist ; I am *Sir John Sydney*, Baronet, of *Sydney House* ; and in one week’s time I shall lead to the altar the loveliest woman in England. You are *not* my wife after all, because I married you under a fictitious name.

You have never been my wife. You are only my mistress, and your child is——”

But Sir John Sydney had gone a step too far. With the bound of a tigress Stella reached his side, and clutched his throat with her white fingers. He felt the blood rush in a purple flood to his face ; his tongue protruded ; his eyes were starting from their sockets ; for the time Stella was insane, and had the power to deprive of life the wretch who had ruined and devastated her own existence, and given a heritage of shame to the child whom she idolized.

Writhing and gasping in her grasp, the baronet contrived at length to draw from an inner pocket, a sharp little stiletto, which he was wont to carry with him in case of a possible emergency. Grasping it firmly he turned suddenly and plunged it into Stella's side.

With a gasping, gurgling cry she sank, a blood-dabbled heap, upon the floor at his feet, the life-tide pouring from the ghastly hole in her breast.

The baronet stood for a moment transfixed with horror at his own deed, then he stooped and drew the dagger from the wound. The great dark eyes flew open suddenly, and fixed themselves upon his own ; the blood-stained lips parted slowly.

“Murderer !” she faltered, brokenly, “*beware !*”

Was it fancy, or did a voice, close at his elbow, repeat that one dread, warning word :

“*Beware !*”

Shivering visibly, Sir John glanced about him cautiously ; but there was no accusing witness ; nothing met his gaze save that white, upturned face upon the floor at his feet. And then he saw that her spirit had fled.

As he paused there, his eyes riveted with a strange fascination upon the rigid, ashen face, a low, moaning sound fell upon his ears, followed by a rushing and roaring, which announced that the threatened storm had at length burst forth in unrestrained fury. Then there came a flash of blue, sulphur-

ous lightning, which was horrible to witness, followed by a deafening clap of thunder, and a stunning report.

A blaze of light, like a lurid ball of fire, darted between the baronet and the prostrate figure upon the floor, and in an instant he knew that the house had been struck by lightning.

With a wild shriek, as though the very fiends of darkness were let loose upon his track, he fled from the cottage, out into the storm and blackness of the night.

CHAPTER VI.

WEDDED.

“Sir John sends his compliments, and begs you to accept this, Miss Geraldine.”

And Ninette, the pretty French maid, laid a velvet casket upon the table near Geraldine Vernon's side. It was at the Vernons' town house in Park Lane, London, and it was the morning of Geraldine's wedding-day. The hour for the sacrifice was drawing nigh, and according to promise the victim was not wanting.

The bride-elect sat in her pretty chamber, surrounded by every luxury that wealth can furnish ; but her face, in its frozen despair, was like the face of a corpse, and in her dark eyes there burned the fires of hatred and passion. As Ninette spoke, she turned her head aside with a weary gesture, and made no reply.

“And, oh, Miss Geraldine !” continued the maid, volubly, “the wedding presents are coming in fast ; and—such beautiful things ! Oh, I should think you would like to see them ! There's jewels fit for a princess—emeralds and rubies, and gold and silver plate, and elegant trifles of every description—enough to furnish a house. How happy you ought to be, Miss Geraldine !”

“*Don’t!*” cried the girl, sharply, and the two small hands clenched themselves together until there were purple marks on the delicate white flesh.

Ninette stared in surprise, and, turning to the velvet case before her, lifted it with tender touch.

“Please, Miss Geraldine—may I open this?” she cried, beseechingly; for she had always been a favorite with her young mistress, and was spoiled accordingly.

Geraldine nodded carelessly. What mattered all the magnificence with which she was surrounded when her heart was broken?

“I’ll open it, then,” went on the maid; “and after that it will be time for you to let me dress you, for it’s past nine, and at twelve, you know, the ceremony is to take place. And it’s such a lovely day, Miss Geraldine! ‘Happy is the bride that the sun shines on!’ Oh!”

Ninette had the casket open now, and drew back from the table with a little shriek of wonder and delight. Sir John’s bridal gift to his unwilling bride was a magnificent set of diamonds and opals mingled. They lay upon their white satin bed in matchless beauty.

“*Opals!*” ejaculated Ninette, with a little pout; “why, that’s too bad! Sir John has sent you opals, Miss Geraldine, and they’re unlucky stones, you know.”

The bride to be smiled faintly—a derisive ghost of a smile; she turned her head slowly, and just then a gleam of white caught her eyes, and she saw that a folded paper lay at the bottom of the jewel-case. She drew it slowly forth and glanced at the superscription. “Lionel Vernon’s Confession,” it said; and beneath these words were added in Sir John Sydney’s handwriting:

“Burn this paper, and your father’s crime will remain a dead secret, for no one in the world save myself holds a clew to the dreadful deed.”

Pale and trembling, Geraldine dismissed her maid. When

she was alone she lighted a wax taper, and, without unfolding the document, she held it in the flame, and waited patiently while it slowly consumed.

She did not wish to know what that dread paper contained ; only let it be destroyed, and then the sacrifice of her life would cover up her father's sin. Oh, had she but glanced at the secret which that sheet of paper held inviolate, how different all her future might have been !

The last scrap of paper consumed, Geraldine bowed her head upon her hand, and fell into a profound reverie.

The moments flitted by. The gilded clock, on a marble pedestal, chimed the hour of ten, and still she sat there oblivious of her surroundings. It was the saddest marriage morn that ever a woman's eyes beheld. At last there came a warning tap upon the door, and her father's voice called softly :

“Geraldine, it is getting late ; the time is flying. You had better be dressing, my child.”

She arose with a weary sigh ; her last hour of respite had expired.

“So help me, Heaven !”—she ground out the threat between her pale lips—“Sir John Sydney shall suffer yet as I am suffering now !” and her words were prophetic.

She rang for Ninette, and, emotionless as a marble statue, submitted herself to her hands. To the last moment she had hoped against hope that something would intervene between herself and the horrible fate before her ; but the last ray of hope was fading away now, and she seemed to feel a great black door swing to upon her future, and to shut out all but dark despair.

Two hours later the long bridal procession swept up the broad aisle of St. George's. An immense crowd had gathered, the church was full to overflowing, and the street outside was black with the curious lookers-on. White as the sheeted dead, the bride leaned heavily upon her father's arm. In her priceless robe of white satin and costly lace, glittering with dia-

monds, she passed on to her doom. Her heart was overflowing with memories of that other wedding-day, when, in spite of the dangers and troubles which had threatened them, life had still looked so fair and sweet. It all came back to her now—poor Geraldine! and it seemed to her, in that moment of horror and anguish, as though she could take the life of the wicked man she was so soon to call by the name of *husband*.

The altar was reached at last. The white-robed bishop, prayer-book in hand, stood waiting as the bridal procession filed forward, the pathway strewn with flowers. A grand show; but from the bottom of her heart Geraldine Vernon envied the little beggars staring at her with open mouths and round-eyed wonder. Even yet a faint, shadowy hope struggled in her breast that she might escape from the fearful fate before her—that it was not too late. For, somehow, hope dies hard in the breast of the young, and the wild delusion had crossed her brain that even at the last moment something might intervene to rescue her. But, alas! nothing came. The words were spoken, the solemn vows exchanged, which in this case, as in many others, were but a travesty; there was a hush resting over all, and the ceremony went on to the bitter end. True, when the fateful words were spoken: “Wilt thou have this man for thy wedded husband?” there was an ominous silence. For an instant Geraldine hesitated. A wild temptation besieged her to cry aloud, “No, a thousand times no!” but a vision of her father (who, harsh, and cruel, and unnatural, was her father, after all) arose before her mind, and she seemed to see him immured in a prison cell, or expiating his mysterious crime upon the scaffold; and so the words were uttered faintly as a sob—the fatal words, “*I will.*”

The benediction was pronounced, the organ pealed forth the triumphant wedding march, and the bridal procession filed slowly out of the church.

Geraldine Vernon's fate was sealed, and she was Lady Sydney. Just at that moment a carriage came dashing madly around the

nearest corner, its sole occupant a young man, pale as death, and so full of anguish and horror was his face that the passers-by turned involuntarily to catch a glimpse as he gazed from the carriage window. As the vehicle neared St. George's, Hanover square, the immense crowd blocked the way, and suddenly rearing and plunging, the horses came to a halt. The driver glanced into the carriage at his "fare."

"A wedding, sir," he answered, laconically.

The young man's pale face blanched to a deathly hue.

"*Whose?*" he demanded, fiercely.

"Sir John Sydney, of Sydney House, they say, and a Miss Vernon, sir. It's over now, I—— Ah, there they come!"

Stifling the exclamation which arose to his lips, the young man sprang from the carriage, and pressed forward through the swaying, pushing crowd. The bridal party was coming slowly toward the long line of carriages drawn up at the curbing to await them. He made his way to the curbstone, and paused there. Geraldine, Lady Sydney, lifted her heavy eyes, and they fell upon his face.

Then shriek after shriek rent the air, and she fell to the ground, a thin stream of crimson blood issuing from her pallid lips.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ORPHAN'S VOW.

The thunder boomed like giant artillery; the lightning shot in lurid flashes athwart the inky sky; the trees rocked in the arms of the tempest; and through it all a slim, girlish figure hurried down the lowly lane where the cottage stood, pausing at length, dripping wet, and shivering with chill and terror, upon the tiny porch before the door.

"Thank God!" she ejaculated, fervently, stopping to draw a long breath of relief. "What a terrible journey—three whole

miles from Waltham ! I did not think that the storm would burst so soon, and I *could* not stay away from mamma. So I left old Zingra, and came alone. I have a strange presentiment that something is wrong. Perhaps she is ill. How still everything is in the house !”

The girl rapped loudly upon the door of the cottage. But there was no response. Again and again she rapped. There was a momentary lull in the storm outside, and for a short time everything was so quiet that she could hear the sonorous tick, tick of the clock on the mantel inside.

“Something *is* wrong !” she exclaimed, aloud, and, throwing her weight against the cottage door, she attempted to push it open. To her surprise, it yielded readily, and Stella Gordon’s daughter staggered across the threshold, half wild with nameless horror, and a dread of she knew not what.

The lamp burned low upon the table, and there was a strange, sulphurous odor in the room ; but at first she did not perceive its silent occupant.

She took one step, and then she paused aghast, while a low cry issued from her pallid lips. For a flash of blazing lightning flew over the sky, and illumined the interior of the room with a gleam beside which the lamp-light was pale and worthless, and it disclosed the prostrate figure on the floor. One bound and Lola Gordon was at her mother’s side, her arms about her, the dusky head pillowed upon her breast.

“Mother ! oh, mother !” she moaned, “what is the matter ? Speak, mother ! Are you ill ?”

Still, no reply. The girl sprang to her feet, and turned the flame of the lamp higher. It shone athwart the pale, set, rigid features of the woman at her feet ; a great blue, livid streak across the brow, which showed the path which the lightning had taken.

“She is hurt !” panted Lola, tearing open the plain black dress ; “she has been struck by the lightning—she——”

The girl paused, with the word frozen upon her lips ; for her

agonized gaze rested upon the great gaping hole in the white breast, whence the red blood was still slowly oozing.

“*Murdered!*” she gasped, piteously; “murdered! Oh, my God! my God! who can have done so foul a deed?”

With her two slim hands she essayed to bind up the fearful wound; but all her efforts to restore her mother availed not—Stella Gordon was past saving. When the girl saw, at last, that all her efforts were in vain, she folded the white hands upon the cold, lifeless breast, and crouched down at her dead mother’s side. The two faces were wondrously alike. The child was only a fresher, younger copy of the original. Lustrous, dark eyes and heavy waves of midnight hair; delicate features, and creamy complexion, betraying Spanish origin in every graceful, undulating movement.

The moments passed slowly. At length Lola lifted her heavy eyes, and staggered to her feet. The little clock upon the pine mantel chimed the hour of ten. She rested her arm upon the mantel, and her slumberous eyes were fixed upon the empty grate; her lips were set in a narrow line; there was a bitter, vengeful expression upon her features.

“Who and where *is* my father?” she burst forth, bitterly. “Curse him, wherever he is! He has never acknowledged his own wife and child; never been aught to us but a miserable tyrant. I hate him! It was at my instigation that mamma left France, where he had hidden us away, his sole excuse being that I might be educated at the old convent of St. Mary. I have never seen him since he left us there, five years ago. But *I think I shall know him*, if we ever chance to meet again. There is some secret, some hidden mystery about it all, and I swear to ferret it out, if it cost me my life!”

She paused, and her moody gaze wandered over to her mother’s white, still face.

“Out in the world I go,” she went on, slowly, her dark eyes kindling with a brassy light, “to find this man, who has devastated my mother’s life, who has wrought her ruin, and who, as

God hears me (I believe it) is guilty of her murder ! Old Zingra used to tell me that I am gifted with second sight. Be it so or otherwise, this I prophesy : I am convinced that John Gordon has had a hand in this. And, so help me Heaven ! he shall pay dearly for what he has done !”

She paused for a moment, her eyes searching the white face before her ; then she stooped, and, removing the wedding-ring from the cold dead hand, she slipped it, with a shudder, upon her own slim finger.

“Now for the marriage certificate,” she muttered, and with eager hands she searched the *escritoire*, but all in vain, and a look of agony dawned on her beautiful face, for an unerring instinct warned her of the truth. “Traitor !” she hissed, vengefully. “Ah !” as her quick eyes wandered to the fireless grate.

With a single bound she reached it, and on her knees searched eagerly amid the heap of feathery ashes for some fragment, some trace, some sign of what she sought.

At last ! She drew her breath hard, and that same yellow light, like brass, shone in her dark eyes. A tiny scrap of paper, which had escaped the ravages of the flames, lay in her hand. Panting and breathless, she held it up in the lamp-light. Yes ; there, plainly discernible, were the signatures of John Gordon and Stella Gilroy, and just beneath, the name of the officiating clergyman, though blackened, and burned, and partly destroyed, “Andrew Ch——,” and there the record ended.

With a groan of agony, Lola gazed upon this certain evidence that something was indeed wrong. It was evident that the certificate had been *purposely* destroyed, and there could be but one person in the world who could have had a hand in such atrocity. Clutching that scrap of paper in one little hand, Lola fell upon her knees at her dead mother’s side, and lifted her white, despairing face heavenward. Outside, the storm-fiend howled, and the thunder sent forth groans of sullen defiance, like a wild beast suddenly brought to bay ; but there upon her

knees, all alone with her dead, Lola Gordon neither heard nor heeded.

“Hear me, Heaven!” she cried, wildly. “I swear, beside her lifeless body, to hunt down to his death the man who has ruined our lives, and murdered *her*! Through the wide world I shall search for this man, my FATHER”—oh, the scorn in the sweet voice as that word passed her lips—“and once found, I will brand him with the name of *murderer*! The same world cannot long continue to hold John Gordon and myself!”

As she uttered these words she chanced to turn her head, and there, upon the floor at her feet, lay a shining, gleaming object. It was a man’s sleeve-button—a costly thing—incrusted with emeralds, and with a coat of arms engraven upon the reverse side. She glanced at it with a curious expression upon her matchless face; then she wrapped it in the bit of paper—all that remained of her mother’s marriage certificate—and hid it away in her bosom.

A slight noise startled her; the door of the cottage swung slowly open, and a man stood before her upon the threshold. With a frightened cry she sprang to her feet and confronted the intruder.

CHAPTER VIII.

FACE TO FACE WITH FATE.

A stranger—a young man of perhaps five-and-twenty, tall and handsome, with a muscular though slender figure, graceful and easy, brown eyes and dark hair, with the marks of gentle breeding in his every gesture. He lifted his hat with a courteous bow.

“I beg your pardon for this intrusion,” he began, “but the storm was so fearful that I ventured in here for shelter. You did not hear my knock, and——” He paused in amazement

as his eyes fell upon the cold white face upturned upon the floor. "Great Heaven!" he ejaculated, "she—is—dead!"

"Yes, dead!" cried the girl, with bitter emphasis—"dead! struck down upon her own hearth by the ——" She paused abruptly, and, controlling herself with wonderful presence of mind, added: "Struck by lightning, sir—stone dead—my mother, all I had to care for in the great, cold, cruel world!"

For in her heart this strange girl had decided to keep the hideous secret of murder, and let no one dream that aught but the lightning's stroke had deprived Stella Gordon of life. The stranger's handsome face wore a troubled expression.

"Are you all alone here?" he cried. "I—beg your pardon, miss—I do not mean to be rude; but this—is a frightful position for you. If you will permit me I will ride to the nearest village for assistance. My horse is outside; I can go and summon help, and return within the hour."

Lola looked up into his frank face.

"God sent you here," she said, simply. "Do you live in Waltham, sir?"

"No. I have just returned from a long sojourn in America. I seek relatives somewhere in this vicinity; perhaps you may know of them. My name is Vernon, Lloyd Vernon, and my father, Lionel Vernon, has a country-place near here."

Lola shook her head slowly.

"No, sir, I know no one at all. I, my poor mother and our only servant (who is, unfortunately, passing the night in Waltham), are strangers here, quite. But if you would take the trouble for the sake of a friendless stranger, you might ride over to Waltham, and go to the little inn there, and ask for old Zingra; she is my only friend, now," and sobs choked her utterance.

"Let *me* be your friend?" cried Lloyd Vernon, impulsively, touched to the heart by the girl's forlorn situation.

He took Lola's hand for an instant, while her dark, pathetic eyes searched his face, with a mute appeal.

Something seemed to strike the girl's heart like a heavy hand, and after that the whole world had changed to the friendless orphan. From that hour her heart was in Lloyd Vernon's keeping, to do with it as he would.

"You are very good," she said, simply. "My name is Lola Gordon; and, I beg you, if you hold any real pity in your heart for my friendless position, do not speak of what you have witnessed here to a living soul! Only—go to the village—if you keep to your right you cannot miss the way—and find old Zingra. Bring her to me, and may God in heaven bless you!"

She pressed her red lips to the young man's hand. A thrill shot through his frame, and his handsome face flushed hotly. Without another word he left the house, and springing upon his horse, flew off through the awful storm and darkness; the thunder still booming sullenly and the lightning flashing over the sky, as though the storm-fiend could never weary of his work.

All at once close behind him Lloyd Vernon heard the dull thud of horses' feet. On, on, nearer and nearer it came; he checked his horse involuntarily; the night was so dark that he could not see a foot before him, but he paused as though waiting for something.

Suddenly he felt a hand upon his bridle-rein, and his horse was pulled back all at once upon his haunches. Then the overpowering, sickly odor of chloroform greeted his nostrils; he reeled unsteadily in the saddle, and fell to the ground without a word.

* * * * *

Kneeling by her mother's side, Lola clasped the cold, lifeless form in her arms, her red lips showering passionate kisses upon the ashen face.

"Mother! mother!" moaned the girl, in bitter anguish, her eyes full of stern resolve, "I dedicate my future to avenge your wrongs!"

The moments came and went, and still the poor girl crouched there. Outside the storm still raged; the thunder filled the air

with deafening uproar, and the lightning was terrific. The clock on the mantel told off another hour ; but the young man had not yet returned. Had he deceived her? Would he never come? Unable longer to endure the suspense, and the horrible loneliness, Lola pressed one more kiss upon the lifeless lips, and springing to her feet, she opened the door and peered out into the night.

Crashing thunder and blazing lightning, and in the midst of it all, the faint, far-off *thud* of a horse's feet. In her terror and alarm, Lola forgot the storm and the darkness, and catching up a shawl from a chair where it lay, she threw it about her shoulders and dashed out into the night. Still the sound of a horse's iron-shod feet striking the hard earth, and still the thunder crashed, and the lightning illumined the black sky with sulphurous flames.

She could endure the horrible loneliness no longer. She dashed down the narrow path which led to the outer gate, longing, oh, so greatly, to hear the sound of a human voice once more.

The broad lightning flashes revealed to her gaze a horse standing at the entrance ; the saddle hung by a broken girth, but he was riderless and alone. He neighed pitifully, and beat the ground with his feet.

"My God !" moaned Lola ; for an iron hand seemed to clutch at her heart ; "what has happened ! It must be *his* horse—Mr. Vernon's ! But, oh, Heaven ! *where is he ?*"

Hardly had the words passed her lips when there came a blinding flash of lightning, followed by thunder most terrible ; and prone upon her face on the wet sod the girl fell senseless, stunned by the fearful shock.

She opened her eyes and gazed wildly about her. The long, fearful storm was over at last ; the thunder was at rest, and the gentle dropping of rain upon her face had restored her to consciousness.

Slowly, slowly the recollection of the night's horrors strayed

back to the girl's memory. She sat up and put her hand to her brow. The lightning shock, which had deprived her of sensibility for a longer time than she could realize, had done its worst for Lola Gordon ; for, as she staggered slowly to her feet, oppressed by a strange foreboding of more sorrow yet in store for her, her eyes caught a glow of light against the inky blackness of the sky, and, with a low moan of horror, she saw that the lightning which had deprived her of consciousness had stricken the little cottage, and it was a mass of seething flame, burned nearly to the ground.

Dragging herself forward, she paused under the dripping branches of a tree, and watched the last flames flicker and die out until there was nothing left of the pretty cot—and her mother's lifeless body—save a heap of charred fragments, upon which the slow rain fell gently.

“God help me !” panted the girl, as she turned and dashed away through the blackness of the midnight.

On, on she fled, poor, homeless creature, not knowing whither she went. The darkness folded her like a mantle. She could not see the path, and a fine drizzly rain beat upon her uncovered head. Still she dashed on. All at once her foot struck something in the path, and with a wild cry of pain she sank down upon the ground in the night and gloom, and the darkness covered her.

CHAPTER IX.

LA BOHEMIENNE.

Loud, and clear, and sweet, a voice fell upon the air—a woman's voice, wild and untrained, but full of wondrous possibilities—and the singer, a girl of eighteen or twenty, tripped onward over the wet footpath which led to Waltham the morning succeeding the occurrences just related. She was not beautiful, only simply pretty and audacious, in her short dress of dark-

blue serge and a sailor hat, her thick walking boots protecting her small feet from contact with the damp earth.

All traces of the frightful storm of the preceding night had disappeared, save for the wet foot-prints left by the rain, and the boughs which had been tossed from the wind-swept trees and occasionally intercepted the pathway.

The girl turned her face up to the morning sky, and came to a halt with a delicious little laugh, which seemed to bubble up from her heart and overflow the rosy lips. As I have observed, she was no beauty. Her face was not at all remarkable in the way of complexion; her nose was a trifle to heaven inclined; her eyes were brown and brimming over with fun; and the thick brown hair lay in a fringe upon the low white brow, after the approved fashion.

"*De-lightful!*" she exclaimed, drawing a long breath, as though striving to inhale all the pure air possible; "the dear, blessed country! It makes me feel like a new creature. Yet how they all tried to frighten me out of coming to this dear old-fashioned place for a bit of rest. They said that I would be lonely; why, it isn't half a quarter as lonely to me as London—smoky old London in the rainy season (and when isn't the rainy season there?) when I was out of employment for a few days and had to stay cooped up in Mrs. Dean's stuffy old rooms waiting for fortune's wheel to turn in my favor. Ah, well! I'm right glad that I secured a re-engagement at the Coronet Theater, though we *have* got to take a provincial tour this summer."

She stooped to gather a bunch of fragrant hawthorn from a hedgerow, near by, advancing with a graceful little *pirouette*, which unconsciously betrayed her calling.

For Dora Wylde was a theater actress. Not a grand tragedienne, or a recognized star in the theatrical galaxy, but a patient little plodder in the lower walks of her chosen profession, appearing nightly in her small parts, dancing and singing, and reciting the few lines allotted her, all for the

sake of the small salary which kept her above dependence and want; for she was a lonely orphan girl, and there was no one in all the wide world upon whom she had any legal claim.

Frank, kind-hearted Dora, or Dot, as she was generally called, was a favorite in the company which had secured her valuable services for another season. Her health had not been strong, and when she had proposed going to Waltham for a brief season of rest, leave of absence had been readily granted her, the company agreeing to "pick her up" as they passed that town on their provincial tour.

"How sweet the hawthorn is!" she exclaimed, aloud. "It is just too utterly lovely out here. But I must make haste, if I expect to get home in time for breakfast. Why!" and she paused abruptly, glancing about her with a startled expression, "this road looks strange to me. Good gracious! I believe I am lost!"

She turned as she spoke, and her eyes fell upon something white right at the foot of a large tree, and a second glance revealed to her a very white face. She darted forward, half expecting to find a ghastly corpse lying there. But as she drew near, the white face was uplifted, and a weak voice cried piteously:

"For God's sake, help me! I have fallen, and I fear I have broken a limb!"

With a stifled whistle, which was her characteristic mode of expressing astonishment, Dot hastened forward, and found herself in the presence of a beautiful dark-eyed girl.

"You poor child!" she exclaimed, in a kindly tone, "how came you here? Looks as if you had been out here all night. Can't you stand?"

And the kind-hearted actress put her arm about the slender form of the girl, and managed to assist her to her feet. But a fearful pain shot through the injured limb, and the poor

girl sank upon the damp ground, while her face went ghastly white.

"I—I cannot stand," she moaned, feebly. "I would give the world, if I could. Yes, I have been here a part of the night. I cannot tell you all now, but my name is Lola Gordon."

"I am Dot Wylde," announced the other girl, naively, sinking down upon a gnarled root beside her suffering companion. "I will do all I can to help you," she went on; "but I do not know where I am. I have missed my road, and am a stranger in this place."

"And I," said Lola, gravely, as she glanced around upon the unfamiliar landscape, "I too, am a stranger here. I had hoped that you could help me."

"A case of the blind leading the blind," laughed Dot, her merry nature getting the ascendancy at once. "I fancy we would both fall into the ditch. But, listen! the sound of wheels, I am certain! Oh, my prophetic soul!" she added, gayly, as around a bend in the green belt of forest came a vehicle, an open barouche.

As it drew nearer they perceived that it had but a single occupant, a man somewhat past the prime of life.

As his eyes fell upon the two forlorn females crouched at the foot of the tree he checked his horses and turned a look of mute inquiry in their direction. His eyes resting upon Lola's face, dilated wildly, and he caught his breath with sickening terror.

Forgetting her pain the girl staggered upon her feet, and leaning against the tree, pallid and trembling, half dead with horror, she pointed one slim finger straight at the face of the man before her.

"Keep back!" she panted, hoarsely. "I know you—fiend that you are! *You are my father*, and the murderer of my mother! But, as Heaven hears me, justice shall be done, and you shall expiate your crime upon the gallows!"

CHAPTER X.

“VÆ VICTIS.”

Lloyd Vernon had returned to England in perfect ignorance of all that had occurred. He had become alarmed at Howard Ashleigh's retarded absence, for not a word had he received from his friend since they had parted on the deck of the steamer *Cambria*, in New York harbor. Geraldine's letters also had suddenly ceased; his father had not written in some time, and, at last, thoroughly alarmed, the young man resolved to go home, and see for himself what was wrong.

Arrived in London, he found the great house in Park Lane empty, except for the servants, who speedily informed him that Miss Geraldine and her father were at their country-house near Waltham, and this announcement was supplemented by the news that his sister had been absent at the place for over a year and a half. Hastily deciding that his informant was out of his senses, yet impressed, in spite of himself, with a strange vague alarm, Lloyd returned to his waiting carriage, and was driven at once to the station, where he took the train for Waltham, with the result already recorded. How long Lloyd Vernon remained in a state of unconsciousness he could never determine; but he opened his eyes at last to find himself lying on a bed in utter darkness, so intense that he could not see one inch before him. He sprang to his feet and called aloud; but no answer came back, only a long-drawn echo, with a peculiar intonation which reminded him of an echo in a dungeon. Although he was still faint and sick from the effects of the chloroform, he determined to find out if possible in what sort of a place he was confined, for a sure instinct told him that he was a prisoner. He moved forward, with both hands extended—on, on until he came in contact with a huge iron door, which was securely

locked on the outside. Groping onward, a short distance, he found that the wall of the place was solid masonry, and the floor was earth. Beginning at the bed he moved onward, intending to pass around the room, back to the point of starting. He had gone, perhaps, half way around the apartment, which was evidently a cellar, when all at once his foot slipped (he could never exactly understand how), and he fell down—down, it seemed to Lloyd Vernon in that moment of horror, as though he would never stop; then there was a sudden splash, and the cold, dark water closed over him.

For a moment he gave himself up for lost; but as he arose to the surface, all at once he had come in contact with something like a stone wall.

“It is a well!” he said, quickly, “and I have found the side. Oh, Heaven! if I can only contrive to climb to the top!”

He was an expert swimmer, or it would have been difficult to keep from sinking. He moved his hand over the object before him, which he believed to be a wall, keeping himself dextrously afloat; but to his astonishment, not unmixed with consternation, the supposed wall moved readily at his touch, and half believing himself in the dungeon of an enchanted castle, such as his boyhood’s fancy had often pictured, he saw before him a faint glimmer of light.

“Heaven!” he panted, eagerly, “grant me hope of escape!”

He peered through the opening with wildly dilated eyes. It grew gradually more distinct before him, and then he beheld a wide black stream of water, leading, he knew not whither; but, at least, it was out in the blessed daylight. Without a moment’s hesitation he sprang through the opening—on, on down the stream, until he saw, with wonder and astonishment, a green sloping bank. Turning in its direction he battled manfully with the waves, determined, though his strength was fast failing him, to reach the shore if possible. He was so weak that the exertion was a fearful one; but on he swam—nearer, nearer, thank Heaven! he is there at last!

Panting and breathless Lloyd Vernon drew himself up on the bank, and gazed eagerly about him that he might ascertain his whereabouts. A low cry of surprise escaped his lips. What he saw was this. He was standing in the midst of a grove of green trees, the black, sluggish stream dragging itself, like a slimy serpent, along at his feet. And away in the distance a gleam of gray—a tall, castle-like building.

Surprised and filled with wonder, he turned to leave the spot, when chancing to glance downward, his eyes caught a glimpse of something which drove the color from his cheek, and made his heart beat wildly. For upon his breast, showing plainly upon the snowy linen which he wore, and not obliterated by his involuntarily plunge-bath, were *the marks of three bloody fingers!*

He started, with an exclamation of horror, and drawing forth his handkerchief, attempted to remove the ghastly stains. As he did so, he observed a slip of linen knotted around his wrist—evidently a handkerchief which had been torn in two for the purpose of binding his hands. He examined it eagerly. It was of the finest linen, and bore in one corner an elaborate coat of arms, in dainty embroidery.

“Great Heaven!” ejaculated the young man, with a start. “What does this mystery mean?”

He looked at the bit of linen attentively. The coat of arms represented two mailed hands grasping a bleeding heart, and above it, daintily and wonderfully executed, in tiny letters, the motto, “*Væ Victis.*”

The young man shuddered.

“Whoever this titled lordling may be,” he cried, indignantly, “he is a villain! But what could have prompted his malice against myself? Perhaps it is a case of mistaken identity.”

But there was no way of solving the mystery. He turned, and looked back toward the gray, castellated pile towering in the distance. Just beside him a great, gnarled oak lifted its unsightly arms in the air—an oddly shaped tree. He drew

forth a pocket-knife, and cut a rude cross upon the trunk, surmounted by the initial of his name, "V."

"Vendetta!" he muttered, with a half-smile. "I shall know this place, if I ever chance to cross it again."

He turned and hastened away, following the stream in its downward course—for some subtle instinct warned him against approaching the mansion, although he knew not the name of its master. He hurried down the narrow path before him. Weak and worn with long fasting, his temples throbbed wildly, his heart beat with difficulty, and occasional flashes of pain shot through his body. An awful horror seized him.

"I fear that I am going to be ill," he exclaimed. "Oh, to reach shelter somewhere! If I could see some one, I would inquire the way to my father's place. It cannot be far from here."

But the road was very lonely, and he saw no one. It was getting late now, and the shades of evening were beginning to creep over all things. On, on he went, his footsteps growing more and more feeble, the pain more and more intense.

At last, weak and exhausted with his long walk, his weary eyes caught a glimpse of a white cottage nestling amid a green bower of trees. With a low-breathed prayer of thanks, he turned in its direction, passed through the pretty white gate, clambered the steps of the vine-wreathed porch, and then fell in a dead swoon upon the threshold.

The door opened softly, and a woman's face peered out.

CHAPTER XI.

"THE DREAM IS OUT."

As those awful shrieks resounded, the crowd about St. George's, Hanover square, grew denser, and pressed closer to the bridal party, until the danger of suffocation was very great. Various rumors prevailed, the one most affected being that a

discarded lover of the bride had suddenly appeared, and had attempted to take her life. The bride's attendants gathered around her; police officers were called into requisition to clear a pathway; the bride, in a state of insensibility, was lifted into the carriage, followed by the baronet, and was driven away toward the great gloomy house in Park Lane.

Lionel Vernon turned, with a ghastly face, and confronted the intruder, whose sudden appearance had been the signal for all this excitement. There was an ominous gleam in the old man's deep-set eyes, and he clenched his hands convulsively together.

"Come!"—he ground the word out between his close-shut teeth—"I have an account to settle with you!"

He sprang into the nearest carriage; the stranger followed him without a word, and it rolled away. In obedience to Vernon's command, it halted before a large hotel. His face was ghastly white and set in unutterable anguish; his eyes were dilated with horror; his breath came and went in fitful gasps, and there was a cold perspiration upon his clammy brow.

"Come!" he repeated, briefly, as he alighted from the carriage and entered the hotel, the other man following silently.

"A private room!" commanded Vernon; and an obsequious waiter ushered the two into a handsome parlor.

Vernon closed and locked the door; then he turned and faced his companion.

"It is true, then, you are not dead," he sneered.

"Not dead, Lionel Vernon," returned the other; "and I have come back to unmask your villainy!"

The old man could be no paler; he sank into a seat, and glared helplessly into the face of the man before him.

"It is really true, then!" he repeated, slowly, as though his mind could scarcely grasp and realize the situation. "It is Howard Ashleigh!"

"You should not have intrusted your attempt upon my life to other hands, Mr. Vernon," returned Howard Ashleigh,

coolly. "Had you struck the blow yourself, I should now be out of your way forever. Mr. Vernon, I have come to claim my wife!"

"Your wife? You are mad!"

"Not at all, sir," returned the young man, calmly. "Of course you understand as well as I, the value of the marriage ceremony which has just been performed. Geraldine Vernon is my wife; she has been my wife for months; and the marriage between herself and that wretched old man is null and void. Good evening, Mr. Vernon; I am going to my wife!" and he moved toward the door of the room.

Vernon struggled to his feet, panting and trembling like a half-dead creature, and caught the young man's arm in a vise-like grasp.

"Stop!" he panted, "or I will kill you where you stand!"

Howard Ashleigh wheeled about and confronted the man before him, with pallid face and blazing eyes.

"Out of my way," he said, sternly, "or I shall forget your gray hairs and strike you down at my feet. Unhand me, Lionel Vernon, or——"

Vernon pointed to a seat with one shaking hand.

"Listen," he faltered; "listen to reason, Howard Ashleigh. You would not attempt to claim an unwilling bride."

Howard's lip curled scornfully.

"An unwilling bride," he repeated, calmly. "No, sir. I am not of the same caliber as your friend, Sir John Sydney."

"Then hear me," panted the old man, hoarsely. "I will admit there has been a fearful mistake committed, and ——"

"Yes," interrupted Howard, sardonically, "*you* made a mistake in not putting me out of the way with your own hands, instead of hiring an assassin, whose cowardly heart failed him at the last moment; and *I* made a greater mistake in appealing to you as possessing a shred of honor or a vestige of manhood."

"A fearful mistake," repeated Vernon, as coolly as though he had not heard a word that had been uttered. "We *believed*

you dead, and Geraldine—she is young, and the young must have some one to love, you know—learned in time to care for another.”

“Meaning Sir John Sydney?” queried Howard, with a withering sneer.

“Meaning Sir John Sydney,” returned the other, gravely. “Have you never heard of love that is won by gentleness, kindness, patient devotion? Can you not understand how Geraldine might have been brought to overlook the difference in years between herself and Sir John; and believing *you* dead, she allowed herself to be won—not coerced or unduly influenced, for the days of forced marriages are passed.”

Howard Ashleigh bowed his head with a groan. Then the words which Geraldine had spoken to him in the great bare room at that lonely old house, flashed back upon his memory: “I hate him, Mr. Ashleigh; I *hate* Sir John Sydney!”

He glanced into the crafty face before him.

“I do not believe you, sir,” he said, concisely.

There is an old adage to the effect that the devil always helps his own. This saying darted into Lionel Vernon’s mind at that moment. He recollected that in his pocket lay a small notebook or diary, the property of his daughter. Moved by an irresistible impulse he had abstracted the book from her *escritoire*, and had glanced over the contents. How fortunate that he could now recall one certain entry in its pages. He drew it forth and laid it in Howard’s hand.

“Glance over that page, my friend,” he said, quietly, indicating a certain entry, “and afterward, if you think best, go and claim your wife.”

With a strange conviction of coming evil, Howard glanced at the entry before him. He knew that whatever it might prove to be, it must be genuine, for this old man had believed him dead, and could not, therefore, have prepared himself for such an emergency as this. He saw the following lines in Geraldine’s own handwriting:

“I have promised to marry Sir John Sydney. It is best in every way, and I shall keep the promise that I made concerning him. How dearly I have loved Howard! But all that is past. God grant me the boon of forgetfulness!”

Here the entry ceased. Howard Ashleigh bowed his head, and his strong frame shook with tearless sobs, for this fearful sorrow had wrecked his whole life. At last he lifted his face, white and haggard, and confronted his tormentor.

“I wish to Heaven!” he cried, fiercely, “that the knife of the assassin whom you hired to kill me had sunk into my heart. Death is far preferable to the horrible fate before me. You are right, Mr. Vernon. I have no wish to see my wife *now*. She believes me dead, and her heart, changeable and unstable as are the hearts of most women, has gone over to the enemy at last. Since she believes me dead, I *am* dead henceforth. No, you must not look so eager and hopeful. I have no intention of committing suicide, but my very name shall be buried in oblivion. Geraldine—Lady Sydney—shall never dream that her lawful husband still lives.”

Vernon laid one trembling hand upon his arm.

“Good Heaven!” he panted, you—you would make her a bigamist! I have *you* to thank for all this misery!”

Howard’s face was full of contempt. He shook off the clinging hand.

“How dare you!” he cried, indignantly, “how *dare* you accuse *me* of the crime which you instigated? I cannot alter the truth. Geraldine *is* my wife; but she shall never dream that there is aught of dishonor in what she has done. I would kill myself first. But woe to the hand that has wrought all this shame, and anguish, and misery, for the day will surely come which bringeth retribution!”

He turned, and, with a look upon his haggard face which Lionel Vernon could never forget, he staggered over the threshold, the door closed behind him, and Howard Ashleigh’s dream of love and happiness was over.

CHAPTER XII.

AFTER THE WEDDING.

She stood like a marble statue alone in her sumptuous chamber, from which she had gone forth only an hour before. She had not removed the bridal finery, and in her shimmering robe she was "fronting her chamber's loneliness." Her chains were forged now—heavy, galling, and unbearable; and there lay before her a future from which she shrank back appalled.

Lady Sydney! How she hated the name, hated the title! To her a coronet was less than nothing, compared with the crown of priceless love which had been hers. Alas! Heaven help her! *had been!* For Geraldine firmly believed that the face upon which she had looked upon the pavement before St. George's—that face so like the loved and lost—had been the result of her own disordered fancy—an apparition conjured up from the grave of the past.

The great oaken door swung slowly open, and Sir John Sydney crossed the threshold. He paused—his ferret-like eyes drinking in her superb beauty. But Geraldine was a different creature in his unwelcome presence. No tears, no sobs, no shrinking now. She turned, with a scornful gesture, and pointed to the door.

"Sir John Sydney," she demanded, haughtily, her voice clear and metallic, "by what right do you intrude upon my privacy?"

The baronet tossed his bullet head back, and his sides shook with silent laughter, as he sank into a satin-cushioned chair.

"By Jove!" he ejaculated, when he was able to speak for merriment, "that's good, now! *Right?* Why, madam, you are Lady Geraldine Sydney, and I am your lawful husband."

"It is false!"

The words were spoken in a low, sepulchral tone ; yet there was no other presence in the chamber—no human creature within sight. Sir John started to his feet, and glanced wildly about him. All his ruddy color vanished, and his face became suddenly pale. Geraldine confronted him calmly. Who had spoken she did not know, and at that moment she cared not ; she had something else to think of than mysterious voices, even though they spoke the truth.

“What was that?” faltered Sir John, in a startled tone. “Who spoke?”

“Your own guilty conscience, perhaps,” returned Geraldine, coldly.

He turned and caught her gloved hand in his own, and pressed it to his lips. Her face grew white as death, save for one lurid red spot which glowed angrily upon either cheek. She stripped the white glove from her hand and tore it into ribbons ; then tossing the fragments upon the velvet carpet, she set one tiny foot upon them.

“Dare to repeat that insult !” she panted, madly, desperately—“dare to pollute me by the pressure of your lips and, so help me, Heaven, I will have your life ! See Sir John Sydney !”

She snatched from the marble toilet-table a tiny dagger ; it had a keen sharp blade, and the hilt was incrustated with jewels.

“What—what do you mean ?” faltered the baronet, in broken accents, cowering before her like a whipped cur. “What are you going to do with that knife ? Put it away, Geraldine ; it has an ugly look.”

She faced him still, with her dark eyes scintillating, and the hand which held the weapon did not tremble.

“What am I going to do with it ?” she repeated, slowly. “I am going to defend my honor, Sir John Sydney. If you presume to venture one act of familiarity I shall plunge this knife into your heart, or my own, I do not care which. Did I not

tell you that I hate you—*hate* you? Did I not swear that if you made me your unwilling bride you should rue it to your dying day? Well, sir, I meant every word that I uttered; I never break my vow. I am your wife in the eyes of the law—all *that* is beyond recall; but keep your distance, Sir John Sydney, or you are a dead man. I am desperate under the burden of my wrongs. I have sworn to punish you, and that shall be the one aim of my future life.”

As the words passed her lips her eyes fell upon the window at her side, and a low frightened cry escaped her; for there pressed close against the pane, was a white, haggard face, the wild, dilated eyes watching her intently.

It was the face of Howard Ashleigh.

CHAPTER XIII.

LADY VENETIA.

We left Lola Gordon with her new friend, the actress, under the tree on the road-side, weak and suffering acutely from the effects of the sprain which she had received, yet struggling to her feet to hurl denunciation upon the man who listened in unfeigned astonishment. Ere the words had scarcely passed her lips, he struck his horses sharply, and the barouche rolled away. He cast no backward glance, but his face had grown exceedingly white, and the gloved hand which held the reins trembled violently. As soon as the two girls were alone, Dot Wylde turned her astonished face toward her companion.

“Great heavens!” she ejaculated, “what in the world possessed you to talk in that way to *that man*? Who is he? Whoever he is he looked awfully cut up at what you said. Why it sounded like a scene from a drama.”

Lola’s face grew ashen white.

“That man is my father,” she said, in a low tone; “but as

surely as I live I will bring him to the punishment that he deserves. Dot, you are so kind and friendly to me, I feel as if I had known you long. Sit down here and listen, for I am going to tell you my story."

Delighted at the prospect of hearing a narrative which might possibly turn out to be as romantic as the dramas in which she was wont to take part, the little actress seated herself and listened with wrapt attention while Lola rehearsed her sad story—all except the fact that her mother had been murdered. This Lola Gordon chose to keep secret. When she had finished her dreary recital, Dot seized her hand and gave it a little squeeze.

"Then you have no home and nowhere to go?" queried the actress, a great tear standing in each of her brown eyes.

Lola shook her head despondently.

"Dear, dear!" cried Dot, sympathetically; "and your ankle sprained so badly; actually nowhere to go. Lola, you shall come home with me—that's if I can manage to get you there. I could *scarcely* carry you, and"—with a melancholy sigh—"I forgot—I have lost my way."

The prospect *did* present a dreary outlook; but Lola saw only the kindness which prompted the girl's words. She bent her head and kissed Dot's brow.

"You are very, very good," she said, softly, "and God will surely reward you."

"Good!"

Dot threw back her brown head and laughed merrily.

"I good? Why, Lola, dear, I am an actress; and the parson up at Waltham church, where I went last Sunday, preached a long sersom against the sin of play-acting and play-going, denouncing all actors as demoralized creatures, whose footsteps lead down to the gates of—well, a place unmentionable to ears polite. I believe he thinks that none of our profession need ever hope to be saved; consequently, all honest endeavor on our part is so much wasted time. Yet *I* would be ashamed to

be as uncharitable as that servant of God, as he calls himself. Hark ! What's that ?”

For a clear, shrill whistle floated on the air, then footsteps, and around a bend in the road a lad of perhaps sixteen appeared, and as his eyes fell upon the disconsolate pair under the tree he started, and a smile illumined his broad, sunburned face.

“Good-morning, Miss Dot !” he began, with an odd attempt at a bow.

Dot sprang to her feet with a cry of delight.

“Oh, Bob,” she cried, joyfully, “you’re as welcome as sunshine ! It is quite providential that you came this way. This young lady has hurt herself ; her ankle is sprained, I think, and I am going to take her home with me ; but we’ve lost our way. Can’t you take us home, Bob ?”

The boy looked thoughtful.

“If the young lady is lame, Miss Dot,” he returned, “I’d better go get the wagon and bring you both.”

“Very well, Bob, you’re a jewel ! But please make haste, for we are awfully tired sitting out here. A contemplation of the beauties of nature is all very well, but it is apt to pall upon one when one gets too much of it before breakfast.”

With another awkward bow, Bob started off, while Dot explained to Lola that he was the son of the widow with whom she boarded while in Waltham.

“She’s a nice, dear, motherly body,” the actress added, “and she’ll make you welcome for my sake.”

“You are very good,” repeated Lola, “and I can see no way to repay you at present.”

“Oh, bother !” cried Dot, hastily. “It’s just too awfully ridiculous to hear you go on so. I esteem it a privilege to help you ; you look like a lost princess in disguise.”

Lola laughed ; the first laugh that had passed her lips in many an hour. There was something so infectious in Dot’s gayety that she felt as one feels when the storm-clouds part in the sky and one bright, dazzling ray of sunlight streams in broadly.

In a short time Bob reappeared with a light wagon, painted a vivid crimson, to which was attached a diminutive donkey—"all ears" as Dot declared.

The two girls were assisted into the vehicle, and Bob drove away, very proud of the honor assigned him. They reached the neat cottage of the Widow Brown on the outskirts of Waltham, and were received by that worthy lady with unfeigned cordiality. She would do anything in the world for Dot, and the sight of Lola, so beautiful and helpless, aroused her deepest sympathy. Lola's sprain was attended to, and in a few hours she was greatly relieved; by the next morning she was nearly herself again.

It was at the close of the second day after Lola was comfortably installed at Mrs. Brown's. She was lying upon the sofa in the neat sitting-room, when there came the sound of a heavy fall upon the cottage porch. Dot rushed to the door, and there, lying upon the threshold apparently lifeless, lay the form of a man whom Lola Gordon had thought never to meet again—the man who had her heart in his keeping.

* * * * * * *

Lloyd Vernon opened his eyes in his right mind once more. For three long, dreary weeks he had lain at the very door of death; but the weary feet did not stray through the mystic portal, and he came back to life again. A sweet face was bending over his pillow—a face which somehow was strangely familiar to him. Memory busied herself for a few moments, and then he stretched out a wasted hand.

"Good heavens!" he faltered, feebly, "am I dreaming, or is it really you, Miss Gordon?"

Lola pressed the thin, white hand.

"Really I, Mr. Vernon!" she answered. "You have been very ill, and must be quiet. Take your medicine, and go to sleep; when you are stronger I will explain everything."

He obeyed her like a tired child, and soon sank into a quiet

slumber. When he awoke again Lola was still beside him, and all that had occurred since their last meeting was explained. He closed his eyes wearily.

"I would like to see my father," he said, at length.

"Your father is in London, Mr. Vernon," returned Lola. "We have taken pains to ascertain his whereabouts. He went there some weeks since to be present at your sister's wedding."

Lloyd's dark eyes flew open with incredulous surprise.

"My—sister's—wedding!" he gasped, brokenly. "Oh, no! I do not understand you!"

"She was married to Sir John Sydney, of Sydney House, near Waltham," explained Lola.

Ere the astonished young man could form a reply, some one tapped at the door of the sick-room.

"Come in!" cried Lola's clear, sweet voice.

The knob turned slowly, the door opened, and an involuntary cry of surprise issued from Lola Gordon's lips. There upon the threshold stood a strange lady—a delicate, fairy-like creature, with a peach-blossom face, and eyes like the blue of a summer sky; and golden clouds of hair falling in loose waves upon her graceful shoulders. It would have taken an astute physiognomist to peer beneath the beautiful surface and detect the claws under the velvet; the hard, glassy glitter which sometimes crept into the unclouded azure eyes; and the expression of supreme cruelty which could take possession of the perfect face. Yet there was something in the atmosphere about this woman which was as suggestive as are the black clouds piled upon the sky yonder, that we are about to be treated to a thunder-storm. The sick man turned uneasily, as the door opened, and his dazed eyes fell upon the lady's face. His own grew ghastly—he caught his breath with a low gasp of pain, or horror, and lifted one hand as though to keep her away.

"Venetia!" his white lips faltered.

She darted forward, and with a tragic gesture fell upon her

knees at his bedside. Lola waited to see no more ; and, followed closely by Dot, she left the sick-room. In the tiny entry outside the door Dot slipped her hand through Lola's arm.

"Did you ever?" she panted, fiercely; "looks like she has a right to be there! Lola, she's a cat!" snapped the little actress, defiantly, and waxing warm with her subject—"a spiteful cat! and—I don't know how much worse! I detest that woman—I distrust her! What right has she here? I know her name—she's Lady Venetia Chandos, one of the grandees who stick up their noses at every honest working woman, and then goes and does a thousand times worse than earning a living!"

Lola turned aside to hide her own tragic face.

"She is Mr. Vernon's betrothed wife, I am sure," she said, softly, and speaking as calmly as though she were not suffering with horrible despair.

"Humph!"

Dot turned suddenly, and drawing Lola's head down, kissed her tenderly.

"There isn't a man in the world worth worrying about, dear!" she cried, warmly.

Lola made no reply, and they went into Mrs. Brown's neat parlor to await the next move in the game.

After a time, there came the swish of silken skirts, and my lady appeared, trailing her azure silk robe over the bare but spotless floor. She walked straight up to Lola and paused before her. Her beautiful, flower-like face was uplifted, but there was a steely glint in the depths of her deep-blue eyes, and the rosy lips were compressed in a narrow line.

"Are *you* the person (oh, the awful superciliousness in the icy, thoroughbred voice!) "the person who—who has attended my—Mr. Vernon during his illness?"

Lola's little head was crested proudly, and her magnificent eyes flashed with superb scorn.

"I have assisted in the care of Mr. Vernon," she returned, quite as icily. "Have you anything to say, madam?"

Lady Venetia drew forth her purse, a tiny toy of blue velvet and pearls; opening it she extracted a sovereign and placed it in Lola's nerveless hand. It was as though she had suddenly struck the girl a stinging blow. Lola's eyes dilated widely, her face became ghastly white, her breath came in panting gasps, and she shuddered as though a chill breeze had passed over her. She turned quickly and flung the money through the open window.

"How *dare* you insult me?" she panted. "Lady Venetia Chandos, I will pay you back for this some day, though it cost me my life!"

And she fled from the room, as though she dare not trust herself to remain longer.

Lady Venetia lifted her innocent blue eyes, full of wonder, to where Dot stood watching her with moody gaze.

"Dear me!" cried my lady, "what an odd person, to be sure! What does she mean? I suppose she is one of the actresses, who, I am told, are stopping at Waltham; low creatures, of course, all of them! Not a woman among them is respectable, and ——"

"Stop, my lady!"

Dot's tiny form was drawn up to its full height, her brown eyes were blazing with a dangerous fire; for a moment she looked like a queen of tragedy. Ah, could Dot have carried that gesture, attitude, tone upon the stage, she need no longer essay her small parts, but aspire to the career of a "star."

"Lady Chandos!" she said, in a ringing, indignant voice, "what right have you to speak in that way of honest women—quite as respectable, and virtuous, and good as yourself? How dare you judge all by a pitiful few? Madam, *I* am an actress, and I am proud of my profession. My life is just as pure as your own, my hands just as clean of all wrong-doing. I would

rather be a play-actor than a miserable sham, spending my time trying to secure a rich husband !”

Every word that she uttered was as clear and incisive as a knife-thrust. The woman before her quailed beneath the withering scorn in her eyes.

“Out of this house this instant !” panted Dot, furiously, carried away by the intensity of her anger. “Actress as I am, I would never intrude myself, *alone*, into a sick man’s chamber ; for I believe, my lady, that you have no more right to be at his side than has the sweet young lady whom you have just insulted, and who has helped nurse him for charity’s sake.”

For, leal and true, Dot would keep her friend’s secret, which she had guessed—a secret to the last.

“No right ?”

Lady Venetia’s voice was exceedingly low, but there was a triumphant ring in it.

“No right ?” she repeated, slowly ; “then ask Lloyd Vernon, since you are so deeply interested ; ask Lloyd Vernon, I say, what Lady Venetia Chandos is to him.”

She swept her silken skirts through the door over the pretty porch, on to the carriage waiting at the gate—a handsome carriage, with a coronet upon it, and a footmen in gorgeous livery sunning himself outside. A short pause ; then the low rumble of wheels, and the sun came out from behind a pile of black clouds, as though an incubus had been lifted.

Pale and stern, Dot Wylde stood watching the unwelcome visitor depart ; then, with a resolute face, she turned and entered the room where the sick man lay.

“Mr. Vernon,” she said, softly, bending over his white face, which had somehow grown suddenly whiter, “pardon my boldness, but I have a good reason for asking you a question. It is this—what is Lady Venetia Chandos to you ?”

Lloyd closed his eyes, and turned his white face to the wall.

“Heaven help me !” he muttered, under his breath. “Lady Venetia is—*my wife* !”

CHAPTER XIV.

A WICKED WOMAN'S WILES.

Lady Venetia's carriage whirled away down the long green country road, on until mile after mile was accomplished, pausing at last before a pair of high-arched iron gates in a grim stone wall. The gates flew open as if by magic; the carriage entered, and bowled slowly up a broad avenue between the rows of whispering limes. Lady Venetia leaned her golden head back upon the azure satin cushions, and closed her eyes. At last the carriage stopped before an irregular, massive building of gray stone. My lady was assisted to alight, and she ascended the marble steps of the mansion and entered a magnificent entrance hall.

An elderly lady, in rustling gray silk, and a point lace cap on her gray puffs, met her with open arms.

"Home at last, my dear Venetia!" she cried, kissing the low white brow. "I've missed you very much."

She opened the door of a pretty blue and silver room near, and entered, followed by my lady. As soon as they were alone, Lady Venetia tossed off her hat, and, throwing herself into a chair, burst into a flood of tears. The elder lady paused before her in consternation.

"*Venetia!*" she cried, aghast.

My lady glanced up.

"Aunt Esther," she said, slowly, "I have been to see Lloyd."

Aunt Esther held up her hands in genuine surprise.

"Alone?" she queried, reproachfully.

"Alone!" returned my lady, her blue eyes flashing angrily; "have I not the right? Aunt Esther, he is my husband—my unwilling husband, who hates me as thoroughly as I (fool that

I am) love him ; but he *is* my husband, after all—nothing can alter that fact !”

And Lady Venetia buried her face in her white jeweled hands.

Aunt Esther looked thoughtful.

“I never *could* understand your infatuation, Venetia,” she observed at length. “Here you are, the orphan daughter of a peer, with perfect beauty and an immense fortune. Young as you are, hundreds have knelt at your shrine, my dear ; yet you turn blindly from them all. Why, you might have worn a ducal coronet, Venetia, for the Duke of Knight was half mad about you ; yet you had eyes for no one but a miserable civil engineer like Lloyd Vernon. Yet foolish passions like that are often ephemeral, and yours would have died a natural death but for your own mad perversity. You followed this handsome dark-eyed Vernon to America. True, no one but myself suspects the dreadful truth, for the world believes that we merely crossed the water for a pleasure tour, and knows nothing of our *accidentally* (?) meeting Vernon in San Francisco ; even the boy himself did not dream that the accident was beautifully designed. It was but a chapter of accidents, after all,” continued the old lady, musingly, while a sarcastic smile crossed her thin lips for an instant ; “for, once in America, you threw yourself upon Lloyd Vernon’s pity (Venetia, I was in the adjoining room at the hotel, and heard every word of your interview) ; and you told him the simple truth—of your mad, unreasoning passion. You, Lady Venetia Chandos, descendant of a long line of noblemen, stooped to tell a beggarly nobody that you loved him—loved him so dearly that your life was a barren waste without him, and threatened to end it unless he showed you some affection. Poor boy ! he was dazzled by your wondrous beauty ; the siren’s spell was upon him, and, acting from the impulse of a tender heart and an honorable nature, he took the leap which, if I mistake not, he is repenting now in dust and ashes. He made you his wife. You were willing to bury

title and every worldly advantage in the grave of oblivion, just for a few hours of rapture."

Aunt Esther paused, and her keen gray eyes went over the drooping figure before her, the flower-like face hidden still in the white, jeweled hands.

"How absurdly happy you were," the old lady went on, slowly, "for a little while! Ah, me! Venetia, you may surround that one picture with a sunny halo, and enshrine it in the inner sanctuary of your heart; for, if I mistake not, you will never see such happiness again. We kept your secret well, and down on the sloping coast, not far from the 'Golden Gate,' you found your pretty Eden. But there was a serpent in Paradise, you know, and the ill-omened reptile found you even there. How well I remember the dark and gloomy morning when the blow fell that bereft you of his love! It never *was* love, Lady Venetia—never aught but passion; and the day of which I speak saw that ill-omened passion in tatters. You remember it all, for you can never forget it—how he overheard an indiscreet conversation, and learned what you had done—knew that your errand to America had been just that—to marry Lloyd Vernon. Had he loved you truly, Venetia, I firmly believe that he would have overlooked your apparent immodesty and unwomanliness. Men love flattery, and nothing flatters a man so surely as the knowledge that a pretty woman entertains a secret preference for his lordship. But the truth came out, and Lloyd Vernon's imitation of love showed its counterfeit side. He told you plainly, harshly, brutally, that he held only disgust in his heart for you—that he would never live with you as your husband; he ordered you out of his sight—back to England—forbade any attempt at correspondence, and, with all proofs of the marriage safe in his own possession, he swore that you should never be acknowledged as his wife. Yes, you may well weep, Lady Venetia Chandos, to think that you have thrown your happiness away like this, and turned your back upon all that might have been prosperity and

peace—all for naught ! And now—we find that he has returned to his native land, and you, you forget your pride, forget the race from which you descend, forget your own self-respect, and—find his whereabouts—and go to see him ! Venetia, my heart is so full of shame and the burden of this disgrace, that I long to die !”

Lady Venetia sprang to her feet, with the mien and gesture of an outraged empress. Her face was snowy white ; her blue eyes glinted like steel mirrors ; her long gold hair, all afloat, had the look of yellow serpents clinging about her slim, graceful figure ; one white hand, shimmering with diamonds and rubies, was uplifted, with a tragic gesture.

“Hear me !” she panted, hoarsely. “That man has scorned me—he shall live to be scorned ! He has disowned me—the day shall come when he shall grovel in the dust at my feet, and plead, in bitter remorse and agony, for me to take him back to my heart again ! I know where to strike ; I can see the truth ; He spurned me from his side to-day, because—listen to me, Aunt Esther !—he has eyes and thought for no one save the black-eyed witch who bends above his pillow, and tends him with the care that a wife bestows upon her husband. I know how to strike, and, when the time comes, I will strike—through her !”

She ceased, overcome by the force of her own intense passion, and sinking upon a chair, she buried her face in her hands.

The old lady bent above her, and pressed her lips to the golden hair.

“Venetia, my child,” she murmured, softly, “I love you dearly ; I will help you all that lies in my power. Together we will aim at this woman who stands in your path—who *dares* to come between you and Lloyd Vernon ; and we will strike through her heart to his breast !”

The twilight shadows were gathering, and now they darkened the room with their gray, ghostly presence. Some-

where—away at Waltham—a death-bell began to toll slowly for the soul of some poor unfortunate whose pilgrimage here was done, and amid the gloomy shadows Lady Venetia's compact of evil was made.

CHAPTER XV.

“BACK FROM THE GRAVE!”

At that moment, in the gray, dusky shadows, Lola returned to Lloyd Vernon's side. Her face was very pale, the large dark eyes were full of brooding shadows, and as she bent over his pillow for a moment—a great burning tear fell like a pearl from her long dark lashes upon his white brow. His eyes flew open, and a red spot leaped up like a flame upon his cheeks. He caught her hand, and pressed it against his lips.

“Lola! Lola!” he whispered, “my darling, my own!”

“Lola! Lola!”

Dot's shrill treble floated in at the open window.

“Where are you, dear?” she continued. “Come into the garden, please. I'm here at the gate alone.”

Lloyd dropped the little hand which lay trembling in his thin palm, and with a low moan turned wearily away.

“Heaven forgive me!” he murmured, faintly, and Lola caught the sound of the broken words, “what a villain I am! Go,” he went on, half rising from the pillows, and pointing one thin finger toward the open door. “Go, Lola, you are breaking my heart!”

An hour later the stars shone down on Lola Gordon, but just the ghost of her former self. Pallid as a snow-wreath, with dark circles of suffering about her beautiful eyes, and a stern, resolute air which had hitherto been a stranger to the girl. For Dot had told her all.

“I must go away, Dot,” she said, after a moment's silence.

"I must leave here and seek for employment of some kind ; but first, I must find old Zingra, and let her know all that has occurred. But, oh, what shall I do? How can I earn my bread?"

"You shall go on the stage with me," cried Dot, eagerly. "With such a voice as you possess I'm certain you need never know want. And, oh, Lola, you will be ever so much higher up than I, for you are fitted for the life."

Lola's eyes grew bright.

"Am I?" she cried, with eager haste. "*Do* you think that I can ever become a successful actress, Dot? Oh, I'd give a dozen years of my life to succeed. Let me tell you, dear, I want to learn to act, and to use the stage disguises. I have an object—a reason for the desire—and some day I may explain. Dot, look at me well. Do you really think it possible for me to don a disguise in which you would fail to recognize me? Tell me, Dot."

Dot nodded her head slowly like a Chinese Mandarin, then suddenly slipping away, she left Lola and entered the house.

It was getting quite dusky in the grounds now, but soon the moon began to climb its pearly, winding stair, and suddenly a pale light was poured like burnished silver over the surrounding objects. Still Lola lingered, loth to leave the pretty garden, shrinking from a return to the house, where *he* lay, so near her, yet separated more utterly than though he lay in his coffin. A footfall on the garden walk startled her, and glancing up Lola saw, coming rapidly toward her, a queer-looking figure. A bent old woman, tiny and wrinkled, with bands of silvery hair showing below an old-fashioned cap, and with immense steel-bowed spectacles over her eyes. She leaned heavily upon a huge oaken staff, and walked with halting gait. She paused as she caught sight of Lola.

"Good-evenin', honey," she began, in a queer, cracked voice. Lola returned the salutation.

"Did you wish to see any one, madam?" she asked.

The old woman scanned her face attentively through the spectacles.

“Yes, I wanted to see—oh, Lola, it’s too funny. If you *could* see your own face. Ha ! ha !”

And away went the wig and spectacles, the bent form was straightened, and Dot Wylde stood revealed.

“Do you believe *now*,” she cried, “that there is any disguise that cannot be readily penetrated? Why, this is one of the very simplest. I tell you, my dear, if you have any particular reason for wishing to disguise yourself I can show you how to do it so that your dearest friend would fail to recognize you. Good gracious !”—in a rueful tone—“some one is coming. Who can it be?”

For a man had entered the outer gate, and was coming slowly up the garden path. Dot, not caring to be seen in her grotesque attire, slipped into a rose arbor near, while Lola paused irresolutely under a lime tree which grew beside the walk. The man drew nearer, and the pale, clear moon-rays falling athwart his face, disclosed the saturnine features of Sir John Sydney. He bowed stiffly as his glance fell upon Lola.

“Mr. Lloyd Vernon is here, is he not?” queried the baronet. “I must see him at once. His sister, Lady Sydney, is ill, perhaps dying.”

Lola stepped from the shadow of the lime-tree and turned her solemn eyes upon his face. She was all in white, and in the radiant moonbeams looked unearthly. Sir John’s face grew pallid, and he shrank away, putting both his arms out, as though to drive her back.

“Mercy !” he groaned, feebly, “it is she—*Stella*—come back from the grave to haunt me.”

At that moment a dark figure rushed forward from the shadow of the cottage, there was the fearful report of fire-arms, and a wild shriek rent the air ; then all was still.

CHAPTER XVI.

A GOLDEN SERPENT.

The shrieks resounding upon the silence of the night brought Mrs. Brown from the cottage, and by the light of the radiant moon-rays a dreadful spectacle was revealed. There, upon the green grass, in the tiny rose-arbor, lay poor Dot, in her grotesque attire, one arm hanging helplessly at her side, and bleeding profusely from the effects of a pistol-shot.

As the report of the pistol, followed by the awful cries, broke the stillness of the night, Sir John Sydney turned and fled from the spot as though pursued by avenging spirits.

Lola flew to the poor girl's side, and, assisted by the horror-stricken Bob, lifted the head of her kind friend upon her arm.

"Dot—Dot!" she cried, wildly, "for Heaven's sake speak to me! Don't stare into my face in that awful way; it breaks my heart. Oh, Heaven, she is dead!"

For the white face lying back upon Lola's arm grew ghastly, and a dazed expression stole into the eyes of the wounded girl.

Mrs. Brown, with creditable forethought, rushed into the house and into Lloyd Vernon's room; seizing a flash of brandy from the table, and without pausing to answer the sick man's frantic questions as to what had occurred, she rushed back to Dot's side, first hastily dispatching Bob, on his fleet-footed pony, for the nearest physician. Then Mrs. Brown forced some of the brandy between the girl's white lips, and after a time Dot revived.

"What is the matter?" she gasped, faintly; then, with a frightened shudder, she hid her pallid face upon Lola's bosom.

“Oh!” she moaned, in piteous accents, “I saw it all. It is only my arm, I think, that has been hurt; and it might have been a human life.”

Dot lifted her uninjured hand, and grasped Lola’s arm.

“Dear Lola,” she said, softly, and speaking with an effort, “I must tell you now, for if I die”—there was a little gulp, as the actress choked down a sob—for she was very young, you see, and death looks grim indeed to youth—“if—if I die,” she went on, sadly, “you would never learn the truth; and, Lola, you ought to know all. You have a terrible enemy, dear—some one who hates you with a bitter hatred; for, listen, Lola—indeed I am telling you the simple truth—that shot was not intended for me, but for *you*. Let me tell you all. While you were speaking to that man, I chanced to turn my body, and I saw standing there, in the shadow of the cottage, a dark figure; not a tall person, but so enveloped in a long, black cloak that it was impossible to identify the person; but, Lola, I believe, from the bottom of my heart, *that it was a woman*. I watched her closely—closely; she turned her head, and I saw that there was a black mask over her face; and the hood of the cloak, which was like a domino, was drawn up over her hair. I think that the entire disguise was merely a plain black domino, such as is worn at masquerades, for the purpose of concealing one’s identity. But I could see the eyes which shone through the holes in the mask; and vengeful, wicked eyes they were, Lola. The figure stood quiet for a time watching you—oh, so intently—then I saw a hand uplifted, and the silver barrel of a tiny revolver glistened in the moonlight. I understood the situation intuitively, for, Lola, the weapon was aimed directly at *you*. I, hidden in the arbor, could see distinctly without being observed. I saw the revolver pointed—saw a finger press the trigger, and I rushed forward, throwing up my arms involuntarily. My intention was to warn you; but, you see, I was between you and the would-be assassin, and the bullet lodged in my arm. But, Lola, it might have taken your life.”

Lola could not speak. Such self-abnegation—to risk her own life for the sake of a girl but lately a stranger, touched Lola Gordon inexpressibly. She bent her head, and kissed the white lips of the wounded girl.

“Heaven bless you, Dot!” she whispered. “The devotion of my life will not be enough to repay you.”

Lola paused with a cry of alarm, for she saw that Dot had fainted again. With Mrs. Brown’s assistance the poor girl was borne into the house, and placed upon her bed. The physician arrived then, and the ball was, fortunately, soon extracted. He pronounced the wound not necessarily serious, and, leaving minute directions, took his departure. Then Lola stole away to the room where Lloyd Vernon lay, for she knew that he was fearfully troubled and excited in regard to the mysterious occurrence, of which Mrs. Brown had ventured to give him a brief outline.

Sitting at the bedside, Lola answered all his questions, explaining the sad affair as concisely as possible, lest she excite him too much. Lloyd listened with eager interest while Lola repeated all that Dot had told her.

Presently Bob came into the room, his face pale with suppressed excitement, in one hand a glittering object. He held it up in the light of the lamp which burned upon the table, his homely features working convulsively.

“See, Miss Lola!” he cried.

Lola sprang forward in eager haste, and took the gleaming object in her hand. It was a gold bracelet, in the form of a serpent, covered with glistening emerald scales, and with two glaring ruby eyes. Lola’s glance, as she lifted her face, asked a fearful question.

Bob hastened to answer it.

“You see, Miss Lola,” he explained, “I caught a glimpse o’ a dark-lookin’ figger out in the shrubbery; so I says to myself, I’ll foller and see who it is; for—no matter what’s what—that person ain’t no earthly business here. So, I slipped up,

soft like, and followed after. The dark figger just seemed to skim over the ground, and flying along in its haste, the cloak which covered it caught in a bush. The person came to a dead halt, and I heard some mutterin' words, but couldn't clearly understand. Then the figger started on again, but as it did so, *clank* comes somethin' down on the walk. I springs out o' the bushes and catches it up, and brings it in here—and there it is."

And Bob's round eyes gleamed triumphantly.

Lloyd Vernon's earnest gaze was fastened upon the golden bauble which Lola held. He put out one thin hand, and, taking the bracelet, turned it slowly around.

He lifted his eyes to the girl's face.

Bob had retired.

"Lola," he panted, a strange excitement in his eyes, and with utmost beseeching in his tone, "I beg you as a favor to say nothing--do nothing to ascertain the identity of the guilty wretch. Lola, darling"—the word seemed to fall from his white lips unaware—"I ask you to do this for *my* sake."

She knew then that there was a guilty secret to conceal. And she caught her breath with a gasp of horror, for she remembered now that she had seen the bracelet before; she had seen it upon the round, white arm of *my Lady Venetia!*

CHAPTER XVII.

A PLOT IS LAID.

"Give the medicine according to directions. If there is no change for the better in two hours, send for me."

Doctor Denzil issued his orders gravely—his face pale and anxious. Then he bowed himself out of the sumptuous chamber where Geraldine, Lady Sydney, lay tossing to and fro, and raving in wild delirium. The time for an expected crisis was nigh; after that he could tell if there was hope for her life.

At the door of the sick-room the good doctor paused.

"Sir John," he said, as he caught sight of the baronet's bulky figure coming down the long corridor, "is there no responsible person whom you can procure to nurse Lady Sydney? The women who are with her now are well enough, but I would rather see her in charge of an intelligent person, if possible, for all now depends upon the way in which she is nursed.

"I know of no such one as you describe," returned the baronet. "If you chance to find a nurse suitable you will do me a favor by securing her at any price."

And then the baronet bowed the physician out to his carriage. Dr. Denzil went straight back to his office at Waltham, and sat down to muse over the case, and how Lady Sydney's life hung by the frailest of threads, when suddenly a faint tap on the door of the office aroused him, and in response to his "come in," a little old woman made her appearance. Gray, and wrinkled, and bent, she was, with huge spectacles hiding her eyes; but spotlessly neat, and with an air of refinement.

"I have called to apply for the situation of nurse to Lady Sydney," she began, in a low, fluttered tone. "Is the vacancy yet filled, doctor?"

Dr. Danzil started. It seemed like an answer to his prayer; for the worthy physician had been more troubled upon the subject than any one could have imagined. He set himself to work to examine the applicant as to her capability, and her answers pleased him. He found her sensible, with strong nerves, and practical common sense—a born nurse. The consequence was that Martha Winters, as she called herself, was immediately engaged, and sent up to Sydney House.

In her lofty chamber, hung with rose-colored silk, with rare pictures on its tinted walls, and a few bits of statuary, worth their weight in gold; with rich lace draperies at the long windows, and a carpet of softest white velvet, strewn with pink rose-buds—a very bower of beauty—lay Geraldine, Lady Sydney,

tossing among her lace-covered pillows, in the grasp of the fever-fiend.

When Geraldine had caught a glimpse of that white face pressed against the window-pane on her miserable wedding-day, her reason for the time had given way. For it *was* Howard Ashleigh. He could not resist the temptation to look upon her face once more before he should turn his back upon London, and return to America and his works, where henceforth he would bury himself from the knowledge of his fellow-men.

“I will look upon her face once,” he had said to himself, “and then I will go away forever.”

And this was the result. Geraldine had caught a glimpse of the pale, agonized face, with its wild, despairing eyes, and shriek after shriek had burst from her pale lips, and she had fallen to the floor in strong convulsions. Toward morning she had grown easier; the succeeding hours brought a settled apathy, and she lay like a statue. But the great house in Park Lane had suddenly become hateful to her; she insisted on leaving London and going back to her father's old country-house, near Waltham. Sir John listened to her demand for removal thither—listened quietly, but his eyes blazed with exultation.

“I'll do it,” he muttered. “I'll have my lady safe, and when once well caged she shall find out, to her cost, who is master.”

So they had her removed by easy stages; not to Lionel Vernon's house, but to the fine estate which belonged to the man whom Geraldine hated so intensely, yet who was her husband. When she had found out the truth she was nearly frantic, for the thought of being alone with him at that quiet place was enough to drive her mad. She had become fearfully excited, and the dormant disease developed into fever. She might never recover, they said; but one way or the other, it would be very soon decided. And all the time her beseeching

cry was for Howard, loved and lost ! Standing at the bedside of his wife—wife in name only—Sir John Sydney listened to her ravings, and at last he knew that not only did she hate him intensely, but—she loved another man with all her heart and strength. He did not dream that there was more concealed from him, that Howard Ashleigh had been Geraldine's lawful husband, but he had heard enough, and he ground out a fearful imprecation between his set teeth, as he listened to her piteous cries for Howard, begging him to come back once more. There was a wicked glitter in the old man's hard eyes, and he registered a vow in the very depths of his heart to bring back to her remembrance, some day, the words that she had uttered, and *a reason why* she should recall them. And he was a man not likely to forget.

Two days had come and gone, and the crisis was at hand. Alone with her charge, the nurse bent over the beautiful face which lay among the pillows, her eyes closed, and the long dark lashes resting upon the pallid cheeks, and gazed long and earnestly. The fever had spent itself, and she lay there like a broken lily ; soon the crisis would be past, and the worst be known. There must have been magnetism, mesmerism, in the gaze of the new nurse, for Geraldine, half conscious, felt herself gradually slipping away into the border land of sleep ; soon her regular breathing betokened that she was in a quiet slumber. The nurse pressed her lips to one white hand.

“ *His* sister ! ” she murmured, softly. “ Lloyd's sister ! I would lay down my life to save hers ! ”

The rustling of the silken drapery made her start as it broke the silence of the sick-room ; the nurse turned, only to recoil with a suppressed cry of alarm, for there before her, her blue, triumphant eyes studying the old woman's face, her own white and resolute, stood Lady Venetia Chandos. A red flush stained the swarthy cheek of Martha Winters. She set her white teeth hard together, and drew back involuntarily. Lady Venetia inclined her head slightly.

"You are the new nurse, I presume?" she began.

"I am the new nurse, my lady."

Lady Venetia bit her lip and glanced suspiciously into the passive face of the old woman.

"Who told you," she began, hastily, then checked herself.

"How did you know my name?" she added.

The old woman made no reply, and Lady Venetia continued:

"Lady Sydney is a great friend of mine, and I—I have called to see her. Do you consider her in great danger?"

The nurse turned an impassive face upon her interlocutor.

"Great!" she returned, quietly, "so great that I must beg you to retire, Lady Chandos!"

As the old woman uttered the words she chanced to lift her eyes, covered by the huge steel-bowed spectacles, and a look of surprise, then horror, dawned in their depths; for that one swift, upward glance had revealed to her something which made her heart stand still. Yet it was nothing remarkable or uncommon which she had seen; merely the coat of arms of the house of Sydney, which was emblazoned over the door-way of the chamber, as indeed it was over the doors throughout the entire house. The old woman stood transfixed, her gaze fastened upon it.

Her breath came and went in fitful gasps, and involuntarily she clutched at something that lay hidden in her bosom. The other's eyes were upon the face of nurse Martha, with a cold, hard, supercilious stare.

"You must go, my lady!" panted the old woman. "Dr. Denzil has given orders that no visitors shall be admitted."

A strange gleam shot into Lady Venetia's steely-blue eyes; she caught her breath quickly, and turned with a haughty gesture, stepped over the threshold, and the sick-room was relieved of her unwelcome presence. At the foot of the grand staircase she encountered the baronet. Lady Venetia pointed up the stair-way; her features livid, and working convulsively.

"Keep a sharp lookout, Sir John Sydney," she hissed "or you will find yourself worsted. Wait!" She paused and glanced

cautiously into his face. "Come into the library," she added, hastily, "I have something to say to you."

They passed into the great, gloomy library, and the door closed behind them.

Left alone in the sick-room the nurse darted forward and turned the key in the lock; then, with eager haste, she tore open the bosom of her dress, and dragged forth eagerly, frantically, something concealed there. A man's gold sleeve-button, set with gleaming emeralds; on the reverse side a coat of arms. She held it up and compared it with the one above the door. Two mailed hands grasping a bleeding heart; over all, the ominous legend "*Væ Victis*." She set her teeth hard together—remarkably strong, white teeth for an old woman to possess—and tossing the disfiguring spectacles aside, raised her right hand toward heaven.

"At last!" she panted, and in her excitement and agitation her voice rang out loud and clear. "I am on the track. I have penetrated John Gordon's secret. I stand here under my own father's roof; and now—woe to you, Sir John Sydney!"

A stifled exclamation fell upon her ears, and turning quickly, the old woman saw Geraldine sitting up, wan and white, among the dainty pillows.

"Say it again!" the sick woman faltered, feebly. "It sounds like music to me. Tell me, do *you* hate him, too?"

The delirium had vanished. Geraldine was in her right mind. The nurse comprehended the situation at a glance. She darted to the bedside.

"Lady Sydney," she panted, bending over the white face, whose dark, beautiful eyes now held the light of reason in their depths once more, "Miss Geraldine," she added, correcting herself as she caught sight of the look of aversion which crossed the sick woman's face at the sound of that hated title, "listen! I have come here to nurse you, but, for a reason of my own, which I will soon explain, I am in disguise. I am a wronged and suffering woman," she went on, wringing her white hands

wildly, "and they call me Lola Gordon ; but Sir John Sydney is my father, and—God help me—the murderer of my mother !"

"I believe you," returned Geraldine, in a calm, resolute tone. "I could credit *any* statement against that man, no matter how fearful. Lola Gordon, do you desire revenge ? So do I ; more—I have sworn to obtain it. I have uttered threats against Sir John Sydney which I long to carry into execution. Sit down here at my side. Though I am weak, I will strive to be strong, that we may devise some plan of vengeance !"

"Wait," said Lola, "drink your strengthening cordial first, and then you will be more able to talk."

She stepped to a tiny table near, where the medicines were ranged side by side, and as she poured the cordial into a wine-glass, her eyes fell upon a letter which had been carelessly dropped—probably an accident—upon the velvet carpet.

Lola administered the cordial, and then deliberately picked up the missive and examined it. She started back with a cry of dismay, as Geraldine stretched forth her hand, and seized the letter.

"Let me see it," she panted. "It is Sir John Sydney's handwriting, and is addressed to my father."

She had it open even while she spoke, and her eyes flew over the contents. Her face, pale before, grew ghastly now, and a look of utter despair came into her great dark eyes.

"All in vain !" she faltered ; "all in vain, I have sacrificed myself ; sold my own soul, to save my father from punishment for a crime, which I find now he *never committed* ! And Sir John Sydney knew it from first to last. Lola, there is no vengeance too severe, no punishment too great, for this human fiend ! I am well now ; I feel my strength returning—urged on by my desperate need. Plot ! plan ! do *anything*, no matter how terrible, so that he is paid back for what he has done ; and I—so help me, Heaven ! will make him suffer for it, though my own life should pay the forfeit !"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PLOT PROSPERS.

After a time the library door opened softly, and Sir John came forth, side by side with Lady Venetia. A gleam of triumph shone upon my lady's beautiful face ; but the baronet was livid with anger, and his little round eyes were full of moody light. At the outer door they paused a moment.

"And you are positive of this, Lady Venetia?"

She laughed, lightly.

"Positive !" she returned. "You will find it to be true yourself, when the time comes. Good-by, Sir John !"

And she fluttered down the gray stone steps to her carriage.

Sir John turned, and began to pace slowly up and down the marble floor of the entrance hall. His face still wore that pale, startled, yet angry expression, and as he walked he clenched his hands together nervously.

"I'll have it out with her—I swear I will," he muttered, stopping suddenly. "She has had her own way long enough. Sick or well, she shall do my bidding, and I'll get at the first of this story sooner or later. It will not pay to thwart me in everything, by Jove ! and she shall learn that I am master in my own house !"

He walked up and down the long hall, slowly, his hands clasped behind his back, his head bent as though in deep meditation.

"Devilish fine woman is Venetia !" he resumed, at length ; "got her eye open to all that's going on. If it hadn't been for my foolish weakness for Geraldine (the vixen !) I should have asked Venetia to be Lady Sydney ; but——"

His soliloquy came to an abrupt termination.

He had come to a halt in a retired portion of the great,

deserted corridor—paused, in a very paroxysm of terror. The long hall ended in a retired nook, a bay-window of stained glass. The sunlight, straying through it, paved a pathway of scarlet, and purple, and orange upon the marble tiles of the floor; about the window crimson damask curtains were draped, making a cozy hiding-place for any one who might choose to conceal themselves therein; and as Sir John paused, his eyes fell upon a face peering at him from behind the heavy curtains. His eyes, staring straight before him, seemed riveted to the spot; his breath came in fitful gasps; his hands grew suddenly cold and clammy, and hung powerless at his side; while a low moan issued from his pale lips. For he saw before him, gazing straight into his own white face, a pair of deep, dark eyes, a face of unearthly pallor, with waves of midnight hair falling nearly to the floor—the form of a woman, delicate, graceful, in a flowing white robe. The baronet gazed as one fascinated, as though powerless to resist the wonderful, searching dark eyes which seemed to look through him; then he turned away and buried his white face in his trembling hands.

“Stella!” he moaned, feebly; “Stella, why will you always haunt me?”

The faint echo of a sigh fell upon the silence; then a voice whispered softly:

“Murderer, beware!”

He started as though he had been struck. Those words had been Stella Gilroy’s last. He sprang forward like a madman, and tore aside the crimson curtains.

There was no one there!

With a stifled cry, he darted away from the place, away from the house itself, out into the great, fragrant garden. Up and down he paced nervously in the sunshine—up and down, for an hour or more; then there came the sound of hurried footsteps upon the garden-walk, and lifting his head, he saw standing before him the nurse, Martha Winters.

"Sir John," began the old woman, gravely, "you are wanted in the house. I am grieved to tell your lordship, but—Lady Sydney is *dead*!"

"What do you mean?" he thundered; "how dare you come here and tell me such a thing?"

"Lady Sydney is—is dead!" repeated the nurse, gravely. "We—we would have summoned you, but she forbade it; and—you had better come now."

Like a madman he dashed up the broad walk into the palace which had been a prison to the beautiful woman who had given him naught but hatred, and soon he was standing in the presence of the white, still figure; she had escaped him, was out of his power at last.

The obsequies were hurried with unprecedented rapidity. Dr. Denzil advising expedition owing to the nature of the disease, which he intimated had developed into a contagious disorder, and necessitated a speedy burial. It was a terrible blow to Lloyd Vernon; he was half mad with grief at the loss of his only sister, whom he had not seen in so long a time. He was quite recovered now, and, with his father, hastened to Sydney House. There was a strange mystery pervading Geraldine's marriage, which was ever present to the young man's mind; but he forgot all other considerations now in the presence of the great grief. The day of his arrival at Sydney House he wandered out into the grounds, for he could not remain indoors, where, alone in the darkened drawing-room *that* lay which had been the beautiful Geraldine Vernon. In his grief and consequent absorption, he wandered on for a mile, perhaps, without realizing the distance. At last he paused and glanced about him; he was still weak, and the walk had been a long one; besides, a suspicion had stolen into his mind that he had seen that spot before.

He was standing on the bank of a dark, turbid stream, in the midst of a clump of tall trees, and there, right before him,

stood a gnarled, oddly shaped oak-tree. Panting and breathless, he sprang forward, and eagerly examined its massive trunk. There, cut into the bark, was a rude cross, surmounted by the letter "V."

"Heavens!" he panted, in wild amazement, "can it be possible? I shall keep my eyes open, for as surely as I live I begin to believe that there has been wrong done!"

The dull, hollow clang of the death-bell broke the silence. One, two, three; he counted the mournful strokes slowly until they had proclaimed *twenty*. He knew that the bell was tolling for his only sister.

He turned his steps back to the house, for the solemn cortege would be soon ready. The bells had begun to toll dismally again, and an hour later the long, almost interminable procession wound down the broad avenue which led from Sydney House, on to the somber old grave-yard not far away, where, within a magnificent tomb, lay the ashes of the dead and gone Sydneys. And in all the country newspapers, as well as those in London, there appeared notices of the death of the young, and beautiful, and lamented Lady Sydney, *nee* Geraldine Vernon.

Time passed on. Days and weeks rolled by, and the excitement and nine-days' wonder concerning the unexpected death of the beautiful Lady Sydney had died out. Dr. Denzil called regularly at Mrs. Brown's cottage still, for Dot was not yet quite recovered, and no one dreamed that there was another patient within the cottage walls.

One night, dark as Erebus, Bob Brown drove his cart and a fast horse over the road which led to a remote town and railway station, keeping ever in the shadow, and flying along as rapidly as possible.

He carried two passengers. One was Lola Gordon, still disguised as the nurse, old Martha Winters, and leaning against her, pale and agitated, with a thick veil effectually concealing

her features, was—*could* it be possible?—Geraldine, Lady Sydney! For the grave had given up its dead, and the strange scheme for vengeance had begun.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN ITEM IN THE "TIMES."

"What *is* the matter with Ashleigh? He has been awfully blue ever since he returned from Europe? Seems to have no eyes, no thought for any of his old friends, ladies especially. I do believe, Kittie, that he has left his heart over in 'merrie England,' with some titled lady, perhaps. It's always the case when any of our young men take a trip across the water—they are almost certain to leave their hearts on the other side."

"Awfully uncomfortable *I* should think," laughed Kitty Dexter, glancing up from the bit of embroidery in her hand into her brother's frank, handsome face; "and awfully uncomplimentary to their own countrywomen, it strikes me. But, really, Hal," and her sweet face grew grave and troubled, "I, too, have observed the change in Mr. Ashleigh since he came home to America. He was your constant companion; you and he and Mr. Vernon were always together, and *so* intimate. It—it pains me to see how sad and altered he is."

Ay, *that* it did, far more than her words would imply. For Kittie Dexter, true and sweet, and womanly, had loved Howard Ashleigh for months—loved him in secret, and concealed in her own breast the knowledge which she would have died rather than betray.

"I wonder what *is* the matter?" she said, at last. "Oh, Hal, I would give anything to know!"

"A *woman*, of course," sneered Hal, and he did not see how white Kittie's face grew at his words. "I'm going out to him," he added, picking up his hat, and stepping through the long

window upon the vine-wreathed porch. In a moment more he was at Howard's side, one arm slipped through his.

"Old fellow," cried Dexter, cheerily, "what's up? You are looking out of sorts. Can't you confide in your old friend? Except Vernon, I have been your most intimate companion. Tell me what troubles you, Howard. Perhaps, old boy, I might be able to help you."

Howard glanced up. His face had grown very pale and haggard, and bore unmistakable evidence of suffering, and his eyes were full of wordless, pathetic sorrow. He tried to force a smile, then turning suddenly, he wrung his friend's hand. Even futile sympathy is sweet to the wounded spirit.

"Thank you, Hal," he returned, gratefully. "You are very kind; but, old friend, you can do me no good. No one on earth can help me. Hal, I have had a fearful sorrow since I saw you last; and—and—I wonder," he added, thoughtfully, "if it would ease me any to tell you all."

"Try," returned Hal Dexter. "I believe that troubles are sometimes lightened by the telling. You know me well, and that no idle curiosity prompts me when I say, tell me all."

Howard took a few more turns up and down; he seemed studying the question in his mind. Suddenly he paused and pointed to a seat under the shadow of a tree not far away.

"Let us sit there," he proposed, "and—I—believe I will confide in you, Dexter."

So, having seated themselves, the young man began, and repeated his sad story from first to last. His romantic marriage, and how Lionel Vernon had caused him to be dragged away on a false charge—a charge trumped up simply to remove him while the rest of the wicked plot was carried out. Geraldine's father had then taken her away to England, and to the best of Howard's belief, had made her a prisoner in that old, deserted country-house. Later Howard had been set at liberty; but, determined to find his wife, he had hastened to England, and there, in the forest, not far from the old house where he be-

lieved her to be a prisoner, he had been attacked by assassins who attempted to take his life. He had been seriously wounded, but managed to crawl to a hut where an old woman lived all alone ; and, as he possessed considerable money, and was able to recompense her well, she nursed him back to health again. As soon as he was able he found his way to the old house, but Geraldine was gone. There were strange servants in possession, who knew nothing of the young lady, save that she had gone to London with her father. He made his way thither, and on his arrival, passing St. George's church, he had found her—his own wife—just married to another—the very man whom she had sworn over and over again that she hated with all her heart.

When Howard finished his sad story, Hal Dexter wrung his hand in silent sympathy.

There was one circumstance which Hal had not taken into consideration. The tree under which the two had been sitting was very near the open windows of the room where Kittie was sitting, with her bright-hued embroidery in her hands. She had overheard nearly every word of the conversation, and she knew Howard Ashleigh's sad secret at last.

Her work fell to the floor, and her eyes, blue as the hearts of violets, dilated with anguish. She trembled violently ; then, with a low moan, she rested her head upon the table before her, and wrestled with the bitter sorrow which had come to darken her life.

Outside, under the pleasant shade of the tree, the birds were singing sweetly ; the soft lap of the waves upon the sand made sweet music, and down the beach came the postman, with easy, swinging tread.

"Foreign papers, sir," he observed, placing a package in Howard's hand. Eagerly he seized the first paper, and opened it with shaking fingers. A copy of the London *Times*—what was there in its columns to blanch his face to such a deathly hue, and bring such despair into his eyes? He could not

speaking to have saved his life. With one cold, shaking forefinger he pointed to a certain paragraph, and Hal Dexter stooped and read it slowly :

“DIED : At Sydney House, near Waltham, on the 14th inst., Geraldine, wife of Sir John Sydney, baronet, and daughter of Lionel Vernon, Esq., aged twenty years. The remains were interred in the family tomb of the Sydneys, at Waltham grave-yard.”

CHAPTER XX.

LADY VENETIA PLEADS.

“Lloyd, hear me. You *must* !”

Lloyd Vernon stood in the luxurious drawing-room of his father's handsome house in Park Lane. He had seen all that remained of his only sister, or what he believed to be her remains, laid away in the great family tomb of the Sydneys ; and then, without an hour's delay, he had left for London. He had lost all trace of Lola. She had disappeared from his life as completely as though he had never known her ; and, although his reason warned him that this was best, he felt that he could not remain in the vicinity. Besides, Lady Venetia was at Chandos Park, her own princely home, a few miles from Waltham, and he would sooner meet his worst enemy than this fair, false woman, who had laid his whole life waste.

So he hurried to London, and on the morning after his arrival at Park Lane, was informed by a servant that a lady wished to see him in the drawing-room. With a wild thought of *Lola*, he had gone down, to be confronted by Lady Venetia Chandos.

The first greeting over—quiet and cold enough, too—followed by a few stale commonplaces, and then Lloyd turned away with a weary look upon his face.

“Lloyd, hear me !” she panted. “You *must* !”

She advanced with the sinuous, gliding motion which was

one of her attributes (unpleasantly suggestive to him now of a serpent), and laid one hand, ungloved and white as a snowy rose-leaf, upon his arm.

“Hear me, Lloyd!” she pleaded, piteously, her beautiful eyes uplifted, dewy with unshed tears. “I am your wife! your wife, Lloyd Vernon—you must acknowledge me—and”—(her eyes blazed wrathfully)—“you *shall*!”

She had made a mistake—a grave mistake; she saw it when it was too late to retract. Lloyd’s lip curled scornfully.

“Listen to me, Lady Venetia Chandos,” he said, slowly; “we may as well understand each other, and settle this question now—at once. No matter what the law may decree, the ceremony which chains our lives together is but a farce; for, so help me, Heaven! you shall never bear my name—you are no wife of mine! Venetia, had I entertained a thought that was tender in my heart for you, it would have died when I found out your fiendish attempt to take the life of that poor defenseless girl!”

“It is false!” she shrieked, when she could command her voice; “false as *you* are. And she, the woman who would deliberately court the attention of a married man, and who——”

“*Stop*, Lady Venetia!”

Lloyd’s voice was very cool. But, my lady, who knew him well, knew that when he spoke in that calm, icy tone, his anger was at white heat. She hesitated.

“Dare to mention Lola Gordon in tones of reproach,” he said, slowly, “and I will publish to the world the *fact* that you attempted to take her life! Lady Venetia Chandos, the would-be murderess, would hardly find so many suitors kneeling at her shrine. Go your way, my lady, and leave that poor girl unmolested, or it will be worse for you. *My* intention is to return to America; once there, I will obtain a divorce; and then you will be free to marry whom you please.”

“And *you* can marry Lola Gordon!” she snarled.

"At least, I shall not be bound to *you*!" he returned, icily.

"Listen!" she faltered, beseechingly. "I love you, Lloyd, with all my heart I love you, and you are my husband! Acknowledge me to the world as your wife; give me a chance to redeem the past, and I swear, before high heaven, to dedicate my future to you. See!"

And she fell upon her knees on the velvet carpet at his feet, her two small hands uplifted and clasped in supplication, her beautiful, flower-like face raised to his own.

"I do not love you!" he answered, quietly. "I was led into that mad marriage—you know best through what influence—it is too late to retract now; but acknowledge you to the world as my wife, never—never!"

She sprang to her feet with a muttered cry of rage and despair; and he saw, with a pang of wordless horror, that she held something shining and glittering in one small hand; and he shrank back appalled at her baseness, for his quick, keen glance saw that it was a knife. He darted forward, with a look of scorn and contempt upon his handsome face, and struck the weapon from her grasp.

"You are bent on murder, Venetia," he observed, with perfect *sang froid*. "It is well that you are always foiled in your attempts. Venetia—Lady Chandos—listen to me; I call heaven to witness my words. I would not acknowledge such a creature as *you* to be my wife; no, not to save my own soul!"

"I will make your life a hell upon earth!" she hissed, slowly, biting the words off with sharp precision. Lloyd Vernon, you shall live to regret this hour, so help me Heaven!"

He bowed coolly, and opened the door of the drawing-room.

"Your carriage waits, Lady Venetia," he observed, serenely.

He offered her his arm, but she turned from him with a disdainful glance; then slowly followed him out into the sunshine.

He placed her in her carriage as deferentially as though she

had not just attempted to take his life, touched his hat in courteous adieu, and the carriage, with its coat of arms glistening in the sunbeams, rolled slowly away.

Lloyd turned back with that mocking smile still lingering upon his face. His gaze fell carelessly upon a play-bill posted on an opposite corner, and he paused involuntarily. No wonder, for the bills announced the arrival in London of "the famous Templemore Theatrical Troupe," for a short engagement, and among the names of the performers was that of Dora Wylde, while flaunting capitals at the foot announced the engagement of "the beautiful young cantatrice, Stella Gordon."

"Great Heaven!" he muttered, in wondering surprise; "what if it should be *Lola*?"

CHAPTER XXI.

BETRAYED.

It was indeed *Lola*; who for her own purpose had adopted her mother's name.

Let us go back to the time when she and Geraldine had laid their plot by which they meant to avenge their own wrongs. They had wisely taken Dr. Denzil into their confidence—in fact, they could not well do otherwise. The good old physician was astonished—thunderstruck at their story; but he had never liked or trusted Sir John Sydney, and when he heard the story which they told him, he readily gave his consent to assist them as requested, in their unequal contest; two feeble women pitted against a bad, wicked man.

So the news of Geraldine's death had been promulgated, and a speedy burial recommended—nay, urged. Geraldine managed to remain quiet as though really dead; the belief that her disease had become contagious served to keep idle curiosity from viewing the corpse. The coffin arrived, and was closed at

once, according to Dr. Denzil's orders ; but it held no dead body, no sad remains of what had been the beautiful Lady Sydney ; but instead, iron weights were substituted, so disposed as to divert suspicion. And in the dead of night Geraldine had been smuggled away to Widow Brown's cottage, which Lloyd had just left, and the widow was taken into the secret, for they felt that she could be trusted. And there Geraldine remained for weeks, until she was fully recovered. It had been a fearful risk to remove the sick woman, but instead of killing her outright, it had seemed to infuse new life into her veins ; and, surrounded by the little band of friends, all devoted to her cause, she began to improve rapidly, and was at length able to act for herself. Geraldine had quite a sum of money of her own in her possession, but Lola, having succeeded in removing her to London, refused to depend upon her bounty. Dot came on at once, and they all lived together in small and obscure lodgings, where, as soon as it was deemed safe and expedient, Mrs. Brown arrived to act as housekeeper and general chaperon.

In the meantime the 'Templemore Theatrical troupe was on the road, but the manager communicated with Dot to the effect that they would soon be in London, and that she must hold herself in readiness to fill the position which she was elected to fill. Her wounded arm had precluded the provincial tour, and Dot was glad to now be able to return to her old work.

One day, in a retired street, she came across the leader of the orchestra at the Coronet Theater, and insisted that he should come and hear Lola sing. He came. Dot managed to hide Geraldine in a small room adjoining the main apartment ; and Lola sang for the old man's delectation. He went away delighted.

"Just what Mr. Templemore needs !" he exclaimed to the delighted Dot. "Miss Wylde, I think your friend is certain to get an engagement, at a good salary too."

Lola devoted all her time to practice, under the auspices of the old musician. Mr. Templemore arrived in London, and

in response to the old man's request, Lola was sent for to come to the Coronet Theater, that the manager might judge for himself. The result was an immediate engagement at a liberal salary ; her *debut* to take place within a fortnight—her *role* being that of a Scotch lassie, the song, “Auld Robin Grey.”

The night arrived, and palpitating with terror, Lola came on the stage. The effect of her beauty upon the audience was wonderful. Her acting was very good, and her singing was divine. They sat like people entranced ; no one seemed to move or scarcely breathe ; but when she had finished, a storm of applause shook the house, and an avalanche of flowers descended about the fair *debutante*. Lola Gordon was a success.

She had assumed her mother's name, *Stella*, for her own purposes. She did not dream that that very name would prove her own betrayal—and worse. The night after her first appearance on the boards of the Coronet, a telegram went flying over the wires from Lady Venetia to Sir John Sydney. He came to London immediately on receipt of it, and almost the first object upon which his gaze rested was a play-bill which announced the appearance at the Coronet of *Stella* Gordon. There was a crowd gathered before the posters as the baronet paused to peruse the words. All the color faded from his ruddy face ; he threw up his arms with a gesture of horror, like one groping in the dark and *afraid* ; then, with a strange, gasping cry, he reeled unsteadily, and fell to the pavement like one dead.

A carriage which had been bowling slowly along, drew up at the curbing, and a beautiful face peered out.

“It is Sir John Sydney !” cried a clear, sweet voice. “Lift him into my carriage, and I will see that he is taken home.”

A dozen strong arms were outstretched, and the baronet placed within the carriage. Lady Venetia gave an order to the coachman, and it rolled away.

That night, when Lola came on the stage to sing, she saw in a proscenium box, gazing upon her with eyes full of malicious triumph, Lady Venetia Chandos and Sir John Sydney. She

trembled violently, and would have fallen but for the strong will which sustained her.

She longed to dart forward, there in the presence of the vast audience, and point her finger at the wicked man who sat watching her with eyes full of fiendish hatred, and cry aloud :

“ You are John Gordon, the murderer of my mother ! ”

But of what avail would *her* accusation be, without overwhelming proof? She, a poor, nameless nobody, a waif, a simple play-actor ; and *he* Sir John Sydney, Bart., of Sydney House, a man with an immense rent-roll, and a title over two hundred years old ! Birth, and position, and family name are mighty, while money, like charity, “ covereth a multitude of sins.”

She turned away, and sang the pretty ballad of “ Kathleen Mavourneen,” and the house came down, and the applause and the floral offerings were equally prodigious. In her hour of triumph the little singer would have been perfectly happy—save, ever and always, that haunting memory of her dead mother’s unavenged wrongs—but for the basilisk gaze of the two in the box near by, for, intuitively, the girl felt that there was danger in the air.

But, somehow, the play progressed, and at last the curtain fell, and Dot and Lola both were free to go home to Geraldine.

As the curtain descended, Sir John Sydney staggered to his feet, white and trembling, for he was horribly afraid. He had long ago forgotten Lola’s existence, forgotten that there had been a child, the issue of that ill-starred, ill-omened marriage ; and now, as he gazed upon the beautiful face, so familiar to him, on the stage, he believed that Stella, poor murdered Stella, stood before him. The name upon the bills was Stella, and the face that gazed upon him from the brightly lighted stage—that face, with the long, dusky hair all afloat, and the soft, lustrous dark eyes shining like stars, and the sweet, low voice which he remembered so well—all, all were Stella’s, his heart-broken wife, whom he had sought to murder. What if she had escaped? What if she were wait-

ing for the hour to come when she should pay him back for all that he had done? The very thought brought the cold dew of despair upon his brow.

Strange that he never thought of the discrepancy in years between the woman whose gentle heart he had ruthlessly broken, and this fair young girl, whose voice was like a singing bird. He thought of nothing, save that *she* was before him, and her name was Stella Gordon.

Trembling and horrified, half-dead with fear and reproach, abject coward that he was, Sir John staggered from the theater, and reached his carriage. Somehow, he never stopped to inquire how it had occurred, Lady Venetia was already seated there.

She caught his arm in a fierce grasp, and raised her steely eyes to his own.

"Listen, Sir John Sydney!" she panted; "I have something wonderful to tell you!"

* * * * *

An hour later, Dot and Lola, in their plain little parlor, with Geraldine lying, pale as a snow-wreath, upon a couch, were recounting the occurrences of the evening, when there came a loud, imperative rap upon the door.

"Come in!" cried Dot, briskly; for at that late hour she believed it could be no one but Mrs. Brown.

The door swung slowly open; and then, with a gasp of horror, Dot sprang to her feet as she beheld the visitor—Sir John Sydney!

He looked like a demon as he paused upon the threshold, confronting the horror-stricken group in awful silence, his wicked eyes wandering slowly and comprehensively over their blanched and terrified faces. Then he drew nearer, and his voice rang out in malicious triumph:

"Lady Geraldine Sydney!" he said, calmly; "I have come for my wife!"

CHAPTER XXII.

KITTIE'S SECRET.

"Dead!"

Howard Ashleigh turned the word over in his dazed, bewildered mind.

The word tolled like a death-knell in his brain. He staggered forward, slowly and falteringly, toward the house, while Hal, fearing that he would fall, followed him closely and so conducted him into Kittie's pretty parlor. He sank into a seat like one exhausted while the news was imparted to Kittie. All her own grief, and the hidden sorrow of her secret, all was put aside—brave little Kittie! she came to Howard's side, and extended her hand in silent sympathy. He held it for a moment in his own, then turned his haggard face away.

"He wants to be alone, Hal," whispered Kittie; "let us leave him to himself."

So they withdrew from the room, leaving Howard to battle with his sorrow alone.

Days and weeks drifted slowly down the aisles of the vanished past, and still the trio lingered at Ocean Springs.

Meanwhile, Kittie had grown strangely cold and distant to her brother's friend. Howard observed it, and felt a dreary sort of regret, but was really too indifferent to the whole world outside of his own sorrow—which, for the time, rendered him selfish—to trouble himself greatly concerning her altered demeanor.

One afternoon Kittie tied on her broad-brimmed sun-hat and went down to the beach, where her boat lay moored—the Undine—a fanciful little craft, all green and gold, with crimson

cushions piled upon the seats. Springing in, and unfastening the boat, she pushed it away from shore.

Hal, lounging idly on the sand, called out, lazily :

“Which way, Kit?”

She pointed down the beach, where the pretty white lighthouse reared its head against the blue, hazy sky.

“All right,” drawled Hal, who was blind as a bat to the real situation, and would as soon have thought that the end of the world was at hand as that Kittie cared for Howard Ashleigh. “Go on, sis ; you’ll find Howard down there somewhere. His ‘boat is on the shore, and his bark is on the sea.’ Oh, I never *could* quote Byron worth a cent. Why, Kit, where are you going?”

For Kittie had deliberately turned her boat about. She would not have encountered Howard Ashleigh alone for the round world.

“Over to the island,” she returned, promptly ; “it’s more quiet there, and I am going to read,” holding up a tiny blue and gold volume of Tennyson.

Hal nodded.

“By-by !” he cried. “Don’t forget yourself, Kittie, and let the tide overtake you.”

“No danger,” she sang out, cheerily ; and the Undine flew away, skimming the water like a bird.

At last the keel of the Undine grated the sand, and Kittie sprang out, fastened her boat by carelessly tossing the chain over a gnarled root ; and then, with her book in hand, and a pretty striped shawl over her arm, she wandered slowly down the beach.

“‘I’m monarch of all I survey !’” she cried, merrily glancing about her—“a female edition of Robison Crusoe. Some girls would be afraid to stay here a moment alone, but I—ah !”

She paused in horror and amazement, a little cry of alarm fluttering from her lips.

Right in her path was a great pine tree, and there lying care-

lessly upon the grass below its branches, smoking like a small volcano, was, great heavens! *Howard Ashleigh*. He sprang to his feet in surprise, tossing his half-smoked cigar away.

"*Miss Kittie!*" he ejaculated, helplessly; then he dropped a mocking glance to the ground at her feet.

Kittie caught the glance, and choked back the nervous inclination to cry which possessed her. She turned a laughing face toward him, and because it *was* laughing, he failed to note its extreme pallor.

"No, Mr. Ashleigh," she cried, "I do *not* spring from the earth, like the enchanted people of fairy tales. I came here in my own boat;" then after a slight pause, "Hal told me that *you* were down at the light-house."

"So I was," returned Howard, serenely; "but becoming tired of the stale scenery in that vicinity, hired a boy to row me up here; I have never visited the island before, for 'distance lends enchantment.' I told the young man to return for me at sundown; I believe the tide rises about that time."

Kittie shuddered.

"I think you had better be away from here before sunset," she returned, "unless you wish to share the fate of the "Three Fishers.'"

* * * * *

"I must go," Kittie said, hurriedly. "See! the sun is setting, and—look, Mr. Ashleigh! Oh, my, look!"

For there at their very feet, crawling slowly up the shining sand, was a pool of black water. Above their heads the branches of the tree swayed in the rising breeze, and a faint, moaning sound went sadly through the bows—that unutterably mournful music of the wind among the pines.

Howard's face had grown very white, but he turned to the startled girl.

"It is nothing, Miss Kittie," he said, quietly, trying to infuse courage into her heart. "Come, you will show me

where you have left the Undine ; even though the water may have arisen about it, I can make my way to the boat. We had better make haste, too, for there is a storm rising ; that accounts for the tide coming in so rapidly—the wind sends it upon the shore.”

She led him on to where the Undine had been fastened, then paused, and a low cry of horror and despair burst from her white lips ; for the boat was gone. Carelessly secured, the wind and the rising water had borne it away, and it was already far out at sea.

For a moment they stood there in perfect silence ; then Howard forced a smile to his anxious face.

“Don’t be discouraged, Miss Kittie,” he cried ; “I do not believe that the island is ever entirely submerged. And, you know, I expect a boat to come for me, directly ; besides, even if the lad forgets or fails to keep his appointment, Hal will certainly miss you and come for you.”

“True !” and Kittie’s face brightened. “How stupid in me. Some one will surely be here before long.”

Still no one came, no voice answered their frantic cries, for the wind was dead against them.

It was a terrible predicament. Howard began to see dimly that the whole night might pass before help could be summoned, even *if* they escaped drowning, and his heart ached for the girl at his side, who, through no fault of her own, would be so seriously compromised. He might swim to the shore to obtain assistance, but the distance was so great, and he was a stranger, and feared that he might never reach the shore ; besides he could not leave Kittie alone on the island to her fate. She might be drowned ere he could return with help.

* * * * *

“Kittie !” he said, softly, “look !”

She sprang to her feet, and peered through the shadows. The cold, dark water was breaking in tiny ripples against her

feet. Howard took both her cold little hands, and looked into her face.

"My child," he said, softly, "what if it *is* death?"

Something in her eyes told the whole story.

Howard's heart bounded in his bosom, and then stood still. He drew her head down upon his shoulder, and gazed into her blue eyes.

"Kittie," he said, in a low, hushed tone, "it *may* be death ; but if it be God's will that we should be spared, will you be my wife, Kittie?"

She uttered a glad little cry, and buried her face in her hands. She did not stop to think that he had not said, "*I love you.*" She did not dream (in her innocence of the world's wicked ways) that he had asked her this question, for her own sake alone, and to save her fair name from invidious comment and slanderous tongues ; she only knew that he *had* asked her, and she faltered, brokenly :

"*I will.*"

At that moment a loud shout broke the midnight silence, followed by another and another ; then they saw, looming up through the dense gloom and darkness, a vessel bearing down toward the island.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ACCUSED.

Sir John Sydney stood glaring down triumphantly upon the white-faced woman, whose dark eyes, full of unquenchable hatred, met his own ; and for a time awful silence reigned ; broken at last by the baronet, who strode forward and seized her arm in his rough grasp.

"Come," he hissed, vengefully ; "your game is played out ;

your pretty farce is ended ; beware, Lady Geraldine, that it does not become a tragedy."

"*Murderer ! beware !*"

The words were breathed faintly into his ear. He started, and turned deadly pale. Poor Stella's dying words had never been forgotten ; and they still had power to blanch his face and strike terror to his heart.

He trembled violently, and peered curiously about the room ; and his eyes, full of horror, fell upon Lola.

With a muttered curse, he turned as though to fly, then he paused, white and terror-stricken.

"*Stella,*" he panted, in a frightened tone, "why do you come back from your grave to haunt me ?"

Lola folded her arms upon her bosom, and confronted him calmly.

"John Gordon," she cried aloud, in her sweet, clear, ringing voice, "your secret is exposed to the light of day at last. I know you—villain ! murderer. My own father—I blush to own it—yet your hand struck my mother, Stella Gilroy, down in death."

His eyes were on her face—riveted there ; for the moment even Geraldine was forgotten.

"Who—are—you ?" he panted, huskily.

"Who am I ?" she cried, scornfully, her dark beautiful eyes flashing fire. "I am Lola Gordon, your own child, and the child of that accursed, thrice accursed marriage, which——"

"Marriage !" he interrupted, with stinging emphasis. "Your own words condemn yourself. You are a child without a name, for there was no marriage in existence between Stella Gilroy—if, indeed, she *was* your mother—and myself. I am not John Gordon. You are mad ! I am Sir John Sydney."

"You are a villain !" cried Dot, springing forward, no longer able to restrain her indignation—"a villain and a murderer ! You shall be proclaimed as such, and hunted down to the fate you deserve ! Leave this house !" she panted, passion-

ately. "How *dare* you intrude your presence here? And as for this lady," indicating Geraldine as she spoke, "you are out of your senses to imagine that she will ever consent to go with you, monster that you are! She will never leave this house, save over my dead body!"

The baronet laughed sneeringly, and laid his hand upon the poor girl's shoulder. She had been sitting all this time staring straight before her in frozen, wordless despair, her eyes dark and dilated, riveted upon space; her hands, grown cold and clammy, were clasped tightly together; her breath came and went slowly, as though to breathe were an effort.

"*Dare* to touch me!" she panted, rising slowly to her feet, "and so help me, Heaven, I will kill you! Sir John Sydney, you ask for proof of the truth of this poor girl's story, and why she accuses you of this frightful crime. Lola, let this man see the trinket which you found by your dead mother's body when you discovered her in the little cottage, not far from Waltham, gashed, and bleeding, and stone dead. Let him look upon it, Lola; perchance he can identify it. *I* have seen Sir John Sydney wear it a hundred times."

Slowly Lola Gordon drew forth the emerald sleeve-button, and held it up before the baronet's gaze.

As his glance fell upon it horror dawned in his eyes; he trembled violently, and a groan escaped his pale lips. He glanced quickly and suspiciously around the room, as though he feared that a police officer might be lurking in its shadow, then, seeing that he had none to contend with save defenseless women, he darted suddenly forward and attempted to wrest it from her grasp.

But Lola was not unprepared. She sprang back with a sudden gesture, and drawing a revolver from her bosom, pointed it straight at his breast. He saw her finger on the trigger, and the look of resolution on her stern, white face, and he drew back involuntarily; then, with an unexpected movement, he struck the weapon from her grasp. As it fell to the floor he darted

forward, and dealt Lola a fearful blow; then, wrenching the jewel from her hand, he thrust it into his own pocket, and turning, ere the other two frightened women could raise an alarm, he swept Dot from his path as though she had been a cobweb, and seizing Geraldine in his arms, he caught up a thick shawl from a chair near by, and threw it over her head, completely smothering her cries. Then through the door he darted, and down the stairs, like a madman. Out into the blackness of the night the cowardly ruffian hastened to where a carriage stood waiting. Geraldine, apparently lifeless, was thrust inside. He sprang in after her, and the carriage rolled away like the wind.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SIR JOHN SHOWS HIS HAND.

“You are my wife, madam. The law of the land will justify my course. I have done more than many men would have done, in taking you back at all. The least that you can do in return is to obey me, and show me the affection which a wife ought to show toward a husband.”

And Sir John Sydney paused, flushed and angry—his small eyes glowing with dull fire. Geraldine, standing at the window of her own room at Sydney House, laughed scornfully. White, and thin, and wan as she was, there was nevertheless a look in her eyes which kept the baronet at a distance.

“Obey *you*!” she sneered, with cutting scorn. “No, sir, I shall never sink so low as that! Sir John Sydney, I intend to force you to do as I demand, for I am going to be rid of you effectually. Sir John Sydney, I intend to have you arrested on the charge of *murder*!”

He started and turned pale, and an involuntary shudder passed over his bulky frame. But he smiled derisively.

“Your proof?” he demanded.

"I know where to find it when the time comes," she returned, icily. She had spoken at random, and she did not know that proof was even now at hand—proof which would have power to make this man quail, and be the cause of his downfall.

Sir John did not dream to what lengths her spirit of hatred and her desire for vengeance would bear her. He had brought her back to Sydney House in the face of the gossip and consequent excitement which threatened to prove of more than the traditional nine days' duration.

He stood watching her now attentively, and there crept into his heart a wish that she was really resting in the ancestral tomb of the Sydneys. But the time was drawing nigh for the baronet to show his hand in this bold game that he was playing.

"Geraldine," he said, slowly, after a silent and prolonged survey of her pale, drooping face, "your father was in my power when I married you. I sent you his confession. Did you read it before you destroyed it?"

She glanced into his face with contemptuous eyes.

"No, I did not," she answered, slowly.

He threw his head back and laughed aloud—a coarse, brutal laugh.

"How well I probed your nature!" he sneered, at length. "You remember that I advised you to burn the paper without seeking to know its contents? Had you opened the document, you would have found it a *blank*!"

She started, and flashed her dark eyes upon his insolent face.

"What do you mean?" she demanded, haughtily.

"As though I would have given you the true paper!" he sneered, "and place myself in your power. Oh, no! my Lady Geraldine; I was not quite such an idiot. Let me break the news to you, my dear. The crime which your father confessed to me, was the crime of *murder*! More, the murder of Howard Ashleigh!"

"God in heaven!"

The words fluttered from her white lips. Then she checked herself with sudden recollection. No matter what she suffered, this wretch should not gloat over it—should not have the gratification of knowing how intense was her agony.

“Yes,” the baronet went on, slowly, studying her face all the time, to see how his words cut, and sank into her quivering heart, “it was the murder of Howard Ashleigh. But, Geraldine, what would you say if I told you (ah, my dear, truth is far stranger than fiction, you know!) that Howard Ashleigh was *not* murdered—that it was all a mistake. Your father is *only* a murderer in intent, not reality, and you have sacrificed yourself on the altar of filial affection, all in vain.”

She did not speak; her eyes were gazing straight before her into space, and although her pale lips moved slightly, no sound escaped them.

The villain went on, in that same malicious tone:

“Yes, you have made a martyr of yourself, my dear; and all for naught. Your father is innocent of the young man’s death, and Howard Ashleigh still lives. What have you to say, Geraldine?”

She threw up her hands with a gesture of triumph, and a glad light flashed into her dark eyes.

“What have I to say?” she panted, her voice ringing out like a silvery trumpet call—“this! That Howard Ashleigh is *my husband*, and I love him; if he still lives, I am his wife; and oh, thank God! thank God! I am free from *you!*”

And the scorn and triumph in her voice were beyond expression.

The baronet suppressed a smile.

“Not so fast, my lady!” he cried, maliciously; “not quite so fast! There are sorrows in this world worse—far worse—than death! You may be as effectually divided as though the dark grave lay between you, yet both be living. Read this.”

And he unfolded a newspaper, which all this time he had held in his hand, and pointed to a certain paragraph.

Geraldine read it carefully; read it twice over, her breath leaving her, her eyes wild with horror and despair, her heart beating so faintly and low in her breast, that it almost ceased. For this was what the fatal paper said:

“MARRIED, in New Orleans, La., U. S. A., on the 22d ult., Howard Ashleigh, Esq., of U. S. Engineer Corps, to Miss Katharine Dexter, of New Orleans.”

Clutching the paper in her cold, trembling hands, Geraldine fell to the floor, white and unconscious. Hope had indeed died in her breast, and the sun of happiness had set.

Yet she dreamed not of the awful, horrible future in store for her, before which all other horrors paled and vanished. But she was destined soon to know, and before another moon should wane, she would stand face to face with the tragedy of her life.

CHAPTER XXV.

DESTINY.

Slowly the vessel approached, looming up like a weird phantom through the night and gloom; and it did not take long to get Kittie and her companion safely on board. The poor girl was wrapped in rugs and overcoats, and furnished with a comfortable seat in a sheltered corner, while Howard, inwardly chafing, stalked up and down the deck in no enviable frame of mind. He was bound—in honor bound—to a woman whom, notwithstanding her sweetness, her purity and womanly qualities, he did not love.

The night was so dark and the wind so strong, that the little vessel cast anchor to await the coming of morning; but when the first faint streaks of red began to appear in the eastern

sky, they started for Ocean Springs, arriving there at a very early hour. Great was the astonishment of Hal Dexter, on his return from the city that evening, when he listened to Kittie's story—Kittie, blushing, confused, but oh! extremely happy. Hal stooped and kissed her,

"I'm awfully glad to hear it, Sis," he said, earnestly. "I'd rather it would be Ashleigh than any fellow I know, but Kittie"—and an unusual gravity settled upon Hal's handsome face—"don't you think it a trifle sudden? I don't wish to throw cold water upon your happiness, Kit, but I'm bound to look after the interests of my only sister; and I must tell you that, only yesterday morning, Ashley told me in that quiet, decided way of his, that he should never marry; that his heart is in the tomb with his bride. Did he *say* that he loved you, Kittie?"

She shook her head slowly.

"I—I don't remember," she returned; "I suppose he intimated it. Why should he ask me to marry him, Hal, if he does not love me?"

But Hal Dexter was silent. He remembered the words which his friend had let fall the morning before.

"Howard," he said, when, a few moments after, the young man appeared, and addressing Hal as Kittie's natural guardian, repeated the story which she had already told, and asked his permission to make Kittie his wife—"Howard," and Hal grasped his friend's hand cordially, "I'll admit that there's no one in the world to whom I would so soon intrust my sister's future happiness as to yourself; but I would advise you both to wait awhile—Kittie, because she is young and inexperienced—you, because your wife has not long been dead. And—and—you surely do not forget the words that you uttered to me yesterday morning. Now, my counsel is this—let everything remain as it is—an engagement, if you like, but conditional. Let us go abroad. You and I have a good long time on our hands before our winter work begins; we have leave of absence still for

several months—why not take Kittie (our aunt, Mrs. Atherton, would be delighted to *chaperone* her) on a trip to Europe? The child has never crossed the water; we will never have a better opportunity—what do you say, Howard? Then, after our return home, you and I will go to our respective duties on the Red River survey; Kittie will remain, as usual, in New Orleans, with Aunt Atherton; and in one year's time she will be prepared to give a *decided* answer.”

“As you like,” returned Howard, half hating himself for the bound which his heart gave.

The little party arrived in London one damp, foggy day, and were soon comfortably situated in a large hotel.

They had not been long in London when Howard suddenly appeared one day in Hal's chamber, pale as the dead, his eyes staring before him, with mute anguish, in his cold hand a portion of a crumpled, torn, and defaced newspaper. It was a fragment of a Waltham journal, consequently it would be impossible to obtain a copy in London, and it contained a portion—but sadly mutilated—of the account of that strange resurrection from the dead. The names of the parties were not mentioned; but something—he knew not what—brought a wild hope into Howard Ashleigh's heart, and made his pulses bound.

When Hal had read the article—all that could be deciphered—he caught his friend's hand.

“What are you going to do, Howard?” he whispered.

“I am going to Waltham,” was the reply. “Can you blame me, Hal?”

He shook his head slowly.

“Go,” he returned, concisely, “and God help you!”

CHAPTER XXVI.

FACE TO FACE.

All London was ringing with praises of "Stella" Gordon, the new star which had arisen. Dot and Lola had recovered from the effects of the brutal blows which had been dealt them by the "nobleman," and were working hard in their chosen profession—working with a hope in their loyal hearts of some day rescuing Geraldine from the awful fate before her.

But Lola could not rest. She came to Dot's side one night, before the hour to prepare for the theater. Dot had lately been rising steadily in her profession—the result of that application and dogged perseverance which sometimes bring about finer results than the *ignis fatuus* flash of genius, which soon burns out, and leaves but a blackened mark to show where genius had once been. She sat studying her part for the night in characteristic fashion; her head bent over the table where a dog-eared book lay, its leaves propped open by a heavy paper-weight, her hands over her ears, lest the slightest sound might penetrate, and the red, saucy lips pursed up, as she conned her lines with eager interest:

Lola drew near the table; but, as Dot did not evince any knowledge of her presence, at last she ventured to lay a hand upon the arm of the actress.

"Dot, what are you thinking of? Your eyes are as bright as diamonds, and have a far-away look."

Dot was blushing now.

"I believe I *will* tell you," she returned, slowly; "although I suppose you *will* think me silly. It's a dream that I had a week ago; and, Lola, will you believe me? I have dreamed the same thing every night since! I dreamed that I was in utter darkness; all about me the most frightful clouds and

gloom ; and I seemed to be whirled away into space upon the very wings of the wind. I felt that I was dying ; sinking down into utter darkness, and all the time I could see before me Sir John Sydney's ugly face, and his eyes glared like balls of fire into mine, and his voice hissed into my ear, 'You are in my power once more ! You will never escape me alive !'

"I closed my eyes, and gave myself up for lost. I could feel a sickening sensation of suffocation, and knew that I was nearly dead. My breath seemed almost gone. I could feel my pulses throb a little, and then stand still ; a bloody mist swam before my eyes ; purple and crimson clouds like fire floated all about me. Suddenly I saw a man's face—a face which I had never seen in my waking moments, Lola. His hand parted the fearful clouds, and he snatched me from the clutches of Sir John Sydney. I heard him cry, in glad tones, 'Saved, oh, thank God !' and then I awoke. But, Lola, listen. If ever I see that face in reality, if ever I meet that man in this world, I shall know him !"

Lola made no reply, and silence fell between them. Dot's eyes were fixed with unusual thoughtfulness upon the fire which burned in the grate. Lola was the first to break the silence.

"Dot," she said, "*I* have something also to tell you. You know to-night ends my engagement at the Coronet Theater. Well, I have made up my mind. I am going to Waltham ; going to Sydney House ; going to find the missing link which will convict the murderer of my mother."

"Lola !"

"I am going, Dot. I must. I feel convinced that it is best. Poor Geraldine has no power to act. She is dying there, in her splendid prison. It devolves upon *me*. I shall see Mr. Templemore to-night. He expects me to renew my engagement at the theater, but I shall tell him that it is impossible. Though, in the future, I may be glad to come back to him for a situation."

An hour later the curtain at the Coronet went up. The play

progressed. Dot did her level best and received well deserved applause and several floral offerings. All of a sudden she raised her eyes to a proscenium box occupied by two ladies and a gentleman. Her face grew as white as the face of a dead person, her eyes dilated wildly, she caught her breath quickly, and then, turning away resolutely, she went on with her part. She was called before the curtain at the close of the performance. Among the bouquets showered upon her was a bunch of white roses—no other blossoms—just the snowy, innocent, fragrant roses. She stooped and picked up the bouquet, and bore it away in her hand. Pale and breathless, she sought Lola in the greenroom.

“Lola! Lola!” she panted, eagerly. “I have seen him! Those flowers came from him! Oh, it is just like a fairy tale!”

“Seen whom?” queried Lola. “I do not understand you, Dot.”

Dot averted her head.

“The man whose face I saw in my dream,” she answered. “You need not look so incredulous, Lola. I told you I would know him if I ever saw him. He was in front to-night, and—and—Lola, don’t laugh; that’s *too* bad—I feel sure that I shall meet him again.”

CHAPTER XXVII.

ARRAIGNED!

There are born avengers in this world; spirits whose mission it is to bring punishment upon the guilty, who know no mercy, and whose hearts are steeled to pity. I think Geraldine Vernon was one of these rare characters, for never once, sleeping or waking, did she waver, or forget her determination to punish this man, who, brutal wretch though he was, yet called himself her husband.

The suite of apartments which she occupied communicated with each other, and with the doors well screened she remained

in solitude. Standing, gazing out upon the bright-hued forest, touched with autumn's glorifying hand, she heard the door open softly. She had given the key to her maid—a trusty soul ; so thinking it the girl, Geraldine turned slowly.

“Lady Sydney !”

She started and suppressed an exclamation. A sister of charity stood before her, her eyes bent modestly upon the floor. A strange thrill went through Geraldine's heart.

“Were you sent here, sister ?” she queried.

The sister drew a little nearer.

“Yes,” she responded, gently. “I was sent here to help you, Geraldine,” extending her arms. “Don't you know me ?”

“*Lola !*” she faltered, in amazement. “Can it be ?”

“Yes, dear. You ought to know that I would come to you as soon as possible. My engagement at the Coronet ended last night, and I came on here at once. Now, dear, just listen !” She forced Geraldine into a seat, and threw herself on an ottoman near. “I have determined that justice shall be done. Are you with me, Geraldine ?”

Her eyes flashed.

“To the death !” she answered ; “but, Lola, what can *we* do, poor, friendless women ? You see that my solitary life has made me weak and discouraged, dear.”

“*Not* friendless,” corrected Lola, “for God has promised to be the friend of the poor and oppressed, and—right is might, Geraldine.”

“Sometimes,” responded Geraldine, gravely.

“I have come now,” Lola went on, quickly, “into the lion's den, because it stands to reason that here, if anywhere, proof exists of the truth of my accusation ; such proof as shall force the world to believe what I *know* to be true. Now, Geraldine, listen to my plan. I have come here in this disguise, so that in case I am delayed here any length of time, you can pretend to be ill, and I—a sister of charity—have called to see you. But I *must* have an opportunity to search Sir John Sydney's

private rooms in his absence. It may consume time ; but, on the other hand, I may find what I seek at once."

An hour passed. Thirty minutes more. Then upon the door of Geraldine's room came a single faint tap. She opened it quickly, and Lola—pale as a ghost—staggered into the room.

"Found!" she faltered, breathlessly. "Oh, thank Heaven!"

Geraldine sprang forward in wild excitement. Her eyes blazed with exultation, her pale face flushed with triumph. She felt no qualms of compunction—naught save the gnawing desire to punish this man who had ruined and cursed her whole existence.

"Tell me!" she panted, eagerly—"for mercy's sake tell me quickly!"

* * * * *

The next morning, when Sir John Sydney left Sydney House for a ride, he was suddenly confronted, just as he was about to spring upon his horse, by two police officers.

"Sir John Sydney," said one, laying his hand upon the baronet's shoulder as he spoke, "it is a painful duty, and I suppose the whole thing is a mistake ; but it's my orders, and I arrest you in the name of the law."

The baronet staggered back a few paces, and his red face blanched to a ghastly white.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, furiously. "What—is the charge, you scoundrel?"

"Of course you'll make it all right," returned the man, soothingly, "but the fact is, it's an ugly charge. It's murder, my lord—the murder of one—Stella Gordon, about a year ago."

"It is false!" bawled the baronet, attempting to break from the man's hold. But he only tightened his grasp on the baronet's shoulder.

"You'll have plenty of chance to prove all that, my lord,"

he returned, quietly. "All you have to do now is to come with us. Fortunately for your lordship, the court is sitting at Waltham court-house, and I have orders to bring you there immediately for a preliminary examination."

Sir John relapsed into moody silence, deciding that discretion was the better part of valor, and so was led quietly away.

In the meantime the story of the baronet's arrest had leaked out, and an immense crowd flocked about the court-house. After the first formalities, Lola was placed upon the stand, and sworn as the most important witness. Sir John's little gray eyes fairly scintillated as they fell upon her, and he looked as though he could tear her to pieces. A buzz of admiration went around the crowded room at sight of her beautiful face. The judge gave her a piercing glance.

"Your name?" he demanded.

Lola's eyes met his gravely.

"Lola Gilroy Gordon," she answered.

"Look at the prisoner, witness," proceeded the judge. "Have you ever seen him before?"

Lola's lip curled scornfully as she obeyed.

"I have seen him before," she answered, briefly, "a great many times."

"Who is he? What is his name?"

"He is Sir John Sydney, of Sydney House, near Waltham," she answered, slowly; "but when *I* first knew him he went by the name of John Gordon."

The baronet started, and a low murmur went around the court-room.

"It is a lie!" he muttered.

"When did you first meet him?" continued the imperturbable voice of the judge.

"I have known him all my life," she answered, slowly.

"Your honor, I am ashamed to acknowledge the truth, but the

prisoner, Sir John Sydney, is my own father, and the murderer of my mother."

The scene which followed beggars description. When at last quiet was restored, Lola began at the beginning, and in her sweet voice, in well chosen words, told her story—that story of wrong and anguish, and suffering and crime.

"Two days ago," she said, in conclusion, "I came to Sydney House in disguise, determined to search for proof, if any existed there, and I felt impressed that such was the case. I made a faithful search. I found what I sought. First, here is the sleeve-button, of which I have already spoken. You will find its mate in Sir John Sydney's jewel-box. This is the one which I found beside mother's body. I know it by this mark. Of course, you may say that I might have abstracted the button for the purpose of criminating this man; but listen: In a small closet in Sir John Sydney's bed-chamber I found a cedar-wood chest. It was locked; but I had come prepared for such emergencies, and I was not long in opening it. I found there, hidden away in that chest, a suit of clothes, rolled up tightly, and covered with stains of blood. In one of the pockets was this card;" and she drew forth a small visiting-card, on the back of which an ominous crimson stain was discernible. "Upon it is written, in Sir John Sydney's handwriting:

"'Mem:—I must go and see "S" to-night, at cottage near W——, and get certificate of marriage from her possession; *must* get her out of my way somehow.'

"If any other evidence is required," she continued, slowly, "here, gaze upon this;" and she drew forth a small dagger, all rusted and corroded with thick, dark stains. "Gentlemen," she cried, in a clear, low, heart-broken tone, "*this is my mother's blood!*"

Groans and execrations rent the air as Lola sat down. Sir John sprang to his feet like a madman.

"What is the meaning of this farce?" he shrieked. "What does all this mummary prove? It is well known that this

girl is an actress. Undoubtedly she knows how to play her part. I demand an investigation. Other and more substantial proof than sleeve-buttons, and blood-stained daggers, and such, all of which could be forthcoming to order. I demand other than circumstantial evidence of my guilt. *I*, Sir John Sydney, arraigned by the charge of a petty play-actor! I demand proof which is——”

“*Here!*” cried a clear, distinct voice.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WORSTED.

Geraldine paced slowly up and down the floor of her sumptuous chamber; her head bent, and a look of triumph upon her pale, statuesque features.

She did not yet know the result of Sir John's examination at Waltham court-house. Lola had not returned, but something assured Geraldine that all was as she desired, and she was willing to wait for further knowledge. There came a faint tap upon the door of the room at last, and thinking it *Lola*, she hastened to open it.

She drew back with a stifled cry, for there upon the threshold stood her father—her father whom she had not seen for many months.

“You wish to see Sir John Sydney, perhaps?” she asked, coldly. “You will find him at Waltham court-house—perhaps by this time in prison, where he should have been long ago.”

Lionel Vernon strode over the threshold, and closing the door behind him, turned the key; then he faced his daughter with a stern, white face, and a look in his eyes not good to see.

“I have come to ask—nay, *demand* of you,” he said, slowly, “what hand you had in this ridiculous affair?”

“Meaning the arrest of Sir John Sydney?” questioned Geraldine.

“Meaning the arrest of Sir John Sydney,” he returned.

She laughed a low, mirthless laugh.

“I will tell you,” she answered. “I did everything in my power to help Lola! Gave her free access to the rooms where she felt intuitively that she would find the evidence of his guilt; and she found it, too! I sent then to Waltham for a couple of officers, and had the gentleman taken away. I trust that he will sleep in Waltham jail to-night.”

“Girl, you have gone mad!”

• He had drawn back a few paces, his face working convulsively with strong emotion; it had grown deadly white, and a strange, wild gleam came into his keen eyes. He came nearer at last, and laid one hand upon his daughter’s arm.

“Geraldine, you are beside yourself. If you do not soon attempt to control your wicked temper, you shall be placed in close confinement. Do you know that in your present frame of mind, it would be an easy matter to pronounce you insane—and—treat you accordingly? I begin to think that Sir John is about right, for he thinks that a removal to a private insane asylum would be——”

“Do I understand you, Lionel Vernon, to say that Sir John Sydney contemplates removing me to an insane asylum?”

“It is the proper place for you,” her father returned doggedly; “and if he is held a prisoner, the duty will devolve upon me. I fancy *that* will bring you to your senses, my lady.”

“That is not the question, sir,” returned his daughter, frigidly. “I ask you, Mr. Vernon, once more, does that wretch, Sir John Sydney, threaten to place me in an asylum for the insane? And he knows that I am not mad!”

Lionel Vernon smiled a disagreeable smile.

“He knows that you are not mad, certainly, only so far as your senseless hatred and persecution of himself is concerned.

And he *does* contemplate removing you to an insane asylum, there to remain until you come to your senses."

For answer, Geraldine turned to a tiny, curtained alcove near. It held a piano, and the crimson velvet curtains were drawn closely. She lifted them slowly, and Lionel Vernon saw, with a quick start of alarm and dismay, that Geraldine's maid sat there, white and still as a statue.

"You have heard what Mr. Vernon has said, have you not?" Geraldine asked, addressing the frightened girl.

"Yes, my lady; I heard it every word."

"Repeat those words as nearly as you can."

"He said, my lady, that Sir John was going to place you in an insane asylum, although he knows you are not insane, to force you to submit to his wishes."

"Very good! You would be able to repeat those words in a court of law?"

"I would, my lady."

Geraldine smiled triumphantly.

"I think that you are worsted in *this* battle, Mr. Lionel Vernon," she said, coldly.

And, crushing an imprecation between his set teeth, the miserable villain left the room, and the house itself.

Geraldine breathed freely once more. The blow was warded off, and, for the present, she was safe.

CHAPTER XXIX.

LADY VENETIA'S OATH.

Lola had left the court-room, and had gone out to breathe the fresh air, for she was very faint and weak from excitement, and the rehearsal of her mother's wrongs—that sad story of an unhappy marriage, sin, shame, and crime.

All of a sudden she came to a halt, and a low cry escaped

her lips, although she would have given anything for power to repress it, for there before her, tall, handsome, and stately, stood Lloyd Vernon, his dark eyes fixed upon her startled face. He held out both his hands eagerly.

“Lola!” he cried.

“When did you come home?” she queried, not daring to glance into his face.

“Home?” he repeated, with bitter emphasis. “I have none. I arrived in England two days ago. Lola, I have heard all, all the strange, wild story—how my sister was rescued—and by whom—from her terrible fate. I have *you* to thank, bright, brave, darling, that she was saved——”

“But to be lost again,” interrupted Lola. “Oh, Mr. Vernon, you do not know how nearly insane I was when I found that he—that wretch—had carried Geraldine away again, first stealing from me the only proof of his own crime, of whose existence I knew. You have heard all?” she added, with a quiver in her voice.

“All. And, Lola, since I have found you here alone, I beg you to listen to me, for I cannot wait to tell you my story. Darling, I love you! I have loved you since I first saw you! Sit down upon this seat under the lime tree and listen—will you, Lola, while I tell you the shameful story of my past?”

Pale and trembling, she faced him bravely.

“Lloyd Vernon,” she faltered, “you forget yourself. Where is Lady Venetia?”

“I am free!” he answered. “Lola, for Heaven’s sake do not imagine that I would insult you by words of love without the legal right to speak them! I am going to tell you my sad story now, and let you judge for yourself wherein I have sinned and have been sinned against.”

And, sitting under the waving shadow of the lime tree at his side, Lola listened while Lloyd Vernon repeated the sad story of his past. He spared Lady Venetia nothing, but revealed her machi-

nations and bold plot to secure him as her husband because of the mad passion which possessed her heart.

So absorbed were they under the whispering lime tree that they did not perceive the slender figure which crouched directly behind the tree—a very white face, with steely eyes glinting with a murderous light, and a revolver pointed—pointed straight at Lola Gordon, one white, jeweled finger upon the trigger.

I am going to record something now which I know my readers will not credit. They will sneer at the idea and laugh the tale to scorn. But, sitting there, Lloyd Vernon suddenly heard a voice—his mind engrossed by the story of his love which he was repeating—a faint voice, which whispered in his ear. It said, softly :

“*Look!*”

He started in amazement. Again it whispered, faint and far away :

“*Look behind you!*”

He sprang to his feet and wheeled abruptly. He saw the kneeling figure of Lady Venetia Chandos, the weapon pointed straight at Lola. Suppressing an oath, the young man sprang forward and dashed the weapon aside.

There was a loud report, and the ball buried itself harmlessly in the green grass a few feet distant.

With a gesture of loathing, he caught Lady Venetia’s arm in a vise-like grip, and drew her upon her feet, confronting her with a face pale and cold as marble.

“Murderess!” he hissed, his teeth crushed together hard, his eyes glittering with the fires of hatred burning in their dusky depths. “For the second time you are defeated in your murderous designs! I have a mind to kill you where you stand, you false, cruel, treacherous thing!”

She turned her turquoise eyes upon his face and laughed.

“I have sworn to kill her!” she panted.

“So sure as any harm befalls her,” returned Lloyd Vernon, sternly, “I will take your life! You have no longer any claim upon me, or my forbearance, thank Heaven!”

She started, and her face grew slowly white; but the devil lurked in her bewildering eyes.

“What do you mean?” she faltered.

“I mean this, Lady Venetia Chandos! The farce of marriage between us is at an end. I am a free man, and *you* can marry whomsoever you will. When you go home to Chandos Park you will find the news awaiting you. A year ago I warned

you that I intended to apply for a divorce on the ground of incompatibility of temper, since that plea is recognized in some States of America, and I cared not upon what ground of complaint I founded my attempt, so that I could honorably procure my freedom. A notice of the application was sent you long ago. I have just returned from America; a judgment has been rendered, giving us both our freedom, with the privilege of marrying again. The former marriage is a dead secret here. You can wed whomsoever you please, and no one will be the wiser in regard to your first matrimonial venture. I care not what becomes of you, my lady, so that you never cross my path again."

She had stood quite still while he was speaking. Her pallid face was unaltered; but there was a curious gleam in the depths of her beautiful eyes. Until now she had never believed that the divorce would be granted.

Suddenly she sprang forward, and falling upon her knees before the two who watched her with strange emotions, she lifted her white face toward heaven. Her long golden hair, falling loose, fell over her shoulders, reaching to the ground; her face could be no whiter—it was absolutely corpse-like. She lifted her two small, jeweled hands, and tore the wedding-ring from her finger.

"Here!" she panted, tossing it upon the green grass at his feet, "'*with this ring I thee wed.*'" Those were the words, Lloyd Vernon! See! I give it back to you! Go! marry the woman of your choice if you dare! But listen! You and the serpent yonder, who stole from me my very *hopes* of Eden; hear me swear once again the oath that I have already sworn. So help me, Heaven! if you wed that woman at your side, you shall rue it to your dying day! I will make her existence a hell; and when I am ready, I will take her life! I care for nothing in this world; and, as for a future life—ha! ha! what can be worse than existence *here*? Do you understand me? Do you believe me? While I live, Lola Gordon shall never be your wife!"

And Lady Venetia Chandos kept her oath inviolate.

A loud cry from within the court-room startled them; and as Lady Venetia arose and swept past them, with superb disdain, Lloyd and Lola put their own griefs aside and entered the building, making their way into the still crowded court-room. A strange scene was taking place; they paused in consternation and alarm!

CHAPTER XXX.

AN UNEXPECTED WITNESS.

"Here!" repeated the voice which had answered (most unexpectedly) Sir John Sydney's frantic demand for positive proof of his own guilt. Every eye was strained with eager interest, as a woman arose and pressed forward through the throng. She made her way to the front, the crowd opening respectfully for her to pass.

The judge wiped his spectacles, and gazed upon her in blank surprise.

"What is the meaning of this interruption?" he demanded.

The woman turned slowly, and lifting her thick veil, disclosed an elderly, care-worn face, with strongly marked features, piercing black eyes, and grizzled hair which had once been the same ebon hue.

"You are examining Sir John Sydney on the charge of the murder of one Stella Gordon, are you not?" she questioned, her language quite correct, though with a strong foreign accent.

The judge bowed, impressed somehow to treat her civilly.

"We are, madam. But what is that to you?"

"A great deal, your honor. I have evidence most important. Sir John demanded it, you will observe, and you will find, if you choose to listen, that my testimony will quite fill the bill desired by the gentleman himself."

"Let the witness be sworn," commanded the judge. "You are aware, madam, that this is merely the preliminary examination; no counsel expected——"

"And *I* tell you," interrupted the woman, eagerly, "that I know enough about the affair to *hang* the guilty party! Isn't that enough?"

"Let the witness be sworn," repeated the judge, imperturbably; and the ceremony was performed.

"Your name, madam?" demanded his honor, settling himself to the task before him with an air of resignation.

"Your honor, may I ask a favor?" was the woman's strange reply. "I would like the prisoner to identify me if you have no objection."

The judge nodded.

"As you will," he returned. "Sir John Sydney, look at this woman—the witness just sworn—do you know her name?"

Slowly the baronet turned his blood-shot eyes upon the old woman's face. All the blood seemed to forsake his own, as his white lips faltered, involuntarily:

"Zingra!"

She smiled.

"I thought you would recognize me," she cried, triumphantly. "Ah, John Gordon, your game is up! Now, your honor" (and she turned to the astonished judge), "if it please the court, I am ready to proceed. My name is Zingra Delle; I suppose I am of gipsy descent, but I never knew my parents, and was only a poor, friendless, stray creature, until Stella Gilroy gave me a home and treated me like a human being. It was in the pretty village of Greenfields, Lincolnshire, that I first knew her. She was an orphan and beautiful—well, you have only to look upon her daughter to know what *she* was like then; she was young, too, and had no one to protect her; so when she fell into the clutches of that wretch, Sir John Sydney, she was like a dove in the talons of a hawk. He courted her under the name of John Gordon, and represented himself as an artist, traveling about the country. He won all her love, and there in pretty Greenfields the two were married, lawfully married, and I—Zingra Delle—and the clergyman's brother were witnesses. The record can be found at the little Church of St. Stephen, at Greenfields.

"Well, they lived in Paradise for a time, and the little Lola was born. When she was a small child, John Gordon insisted on taking his wife and babe away to the south of France, and I insisted on accompanying them. I had never liked John Gordon, as he called himself. I doubted and distrusted him. But I never dreamed of his real rank and station; I never dreamed that he was a baronet, neither did the woman whom he wedded; she lived and died in ignorance of it all.

"For years we lived in the south of France, John Gordon coming occasionally for a few days' visit. Lola grew up, and was well educated at the Convent of St. Mary's. But, as the girl grew older, she became possessed with the demon of discontent. She never loved her father; she seemed to doubt his truth and honor. He had not come to see them in a long time. Finally, his visits ceased altogether, and only the money which he sent served to remind the girl that she had a father. The baronet was foolish enough to mail his letters to his wife

from Waltham post-office. So, knowing his whereabouts, she at last yielded to Lola's entreaties, and came to Waltham. Almost the first person whom she met after her arrival was her husband. He was terribly annoyed at her unexpected appearance ; and, at last, ended by placing his wife and child, with myself, in a cottage buried in a lonely lane, making her swear to keep secret the fact that she was his wife. We lived there for several months, Lola sometimes singing at the rich houses, and thus making a little money, which we needed sadly, for the villain finally ceased to provide at all for his family.

"One night Lola went to sing at one of the fine houses. I, as usual, accompanied her. After a time a violent storm burst forth ; and I, knowing that the girl had come out unprovided with a cloak, hastened back to the cottage to procure them. Arrived there, in the darkness and fast gathering tempest, I was startled by hearing voices within. Something prompted me to go to the window and glance in. Gentlemen, I swear to you that I saw John Gordon—that man yonder—*stab his wife* to the heart, and she fell dead upon the floor. In my horror, fright, agony, I ran from the spot, shrieking and screaming in wild despair. On, on I flew, never pausing until I was back at Waltham. There I found, to my dismay, that Lola had gone home. Knowing the horrible sight that would await her there, I started to return, for I would have died to have saved her from that awful spectacle. But, half way through the forest, I was seized by some one, and a cloth thrown over my head, and I was borne away.

"When I opened my eyes again, I was on board a vessel far out at sea. I soon discovered that the captain—a villainous fellow—had been bribed to put me out of the way ; but Heaven interposed ; and at last, after months of hardship and privation, I have managed to get free ; and just in time, thank Heaven, to give my testimony. I swear that John Gordon, or Sir John Sydney—that man yonder—is the murderer of Stella Gilroy Gordon, his wife !"

A deep silence fell like a pall, broken by an unexpected apparition. Hurrying through the crowded court-room, pale as a specter, came Geraldine. She moved forward, and, in a low, tense tone, demanded to be sworn as a witness.

"A witness, my lady !" gasped the astonished judge. "I do not understand you. Surely, not against Sir John Sydney ?" Her white, resolute face grew sterner.

"Against Sir John Sydney, your honor," she answered, curtly.

"But, my lady, the law does not receive testimony from a wife against her husband. You are Sir John Sydney's wife, my lady."

She drew her lithe form up proudly, and glanced fearlessly into the face of the judge.

"You are mistaken," she replied. "I am *not* Sir John Sydney's wife!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

RESCUED.

Night after night Dot Wylde beheld the same face in the proscenium-box at the Coronet; and, somehow, the happiest moments of her life seemed those passed "upon the boards." Lola's departure had filled the girl's faithful heart with keenest regret. She missed Lola constantly; but since the errand upon which she had gone was so commendable, Dot could only stifle her own emotions and pray earnestly for her friend's success. To the little actress there was a keen pleasure now in her profession. In all the great audience which nightly greeted her, Dot Wylde played for one person alone. Every impulse of her being was stimulated to please that one critic, who every night appeared in the same box, with the same floral offering — a bunch of snowy roses. Had careless, *insouciant* little Dot found her fate at last?

She bent all her energies to the task before her, improving so wonderfully as to elicit applause from Mr. Templemore, who hinted at an increase of salary.

So time passed, and slowly but surely came the crisis in Dot Wylde's life. One night the play was "Lear." Some bright particular star portrayed the mad old king, and the leading lady being ill, Dot was chosen to essay the part of Cordelia. She had never hoped for this opportunity, and she bent all her energies to the task, with a very creditable result. And, as usual, her inspiration, *that* face, smiled at her from the usual place, while at the close of the performance the bunch of roses was thrown at her feet. She stooped and picked them up, with a shy little glance toward their giver; then, with a graceful inclination of the head, she disappeared behind the curtain.

Once alone in the dingy little dressing-room, Dot glanced cautiously about, to make sure that she was not observed; then she pressed her lips to the fragrant flowers. As she did so she

caught a glimpse of something hidden in the heart of the bouquet, and, with trembling fingers, she drew forth a handsome diamond ring, attached to a slip of silky paper.

Paling and flushing by turns, Dot opened the paper and saw these words, written in a bold, decided hand :

“MISS WYLDE : Will you accept this trifling gift, and with it the highest appreciation and regard of one who begs to subscribe himself

“Your friend,

HALTON DEXTER?”

For a moment Dot stood, the hand holding the note pressed close to her heart, her eyes shining, her face lit up with pleasure.

“I have found out his name,” she exclaimed ; “but,” as her eyes fell on the ring, “I wish he had not sent me that ! Anybody can give me a jewel ; but *he*——”

She turned the ring over and over—a handsome solitaire ; she slipped it on her finger ; then, with a guilty blush, tore it off again, and hid it in her bosom.

There was a rap at the door ; it opened a few inches, and a blonde, frizzled head was thrust in. It was the soubrette of the company.

“Dot,” she cried, gayly, “what are you mooning about in here alone ? Come into the greenroom ; there is a gentleman there asking to see you.”

And, wondering greatly, Dot complied. She found herself in the presence of a stranger—an elderly man, with an air of deep humility.

“Miss Wylde ?” he interrogated.

Dot bowed.

“I am sent to you on a painful errand,” continued the stranger. “Your friend, Miss Lola Gordon”—Dot started and turned pale—“just returned to London, has met with a serious accident, and lies very ill at the Denham House ; she begs you to come to her at once. See ; she managed to write this :”

And he produced a card, upon which was feebly scrawled :

“Please come, dear Dot.

LOLA.”

Dot’s sole answer was to turn to a chair beside her, upon which a cloak was lying. Then, suddenly remembering that she still wore her stage costume, she begged the messenger to wait a moment, and, hastening back to her dressing-room, changed her attire for the plain street suit which she had worn to the theater, tied on a hat and veil, and, returning, pronounced herself ready.

There was not a single misgiving in her heart, as she followed her conductor down the narrow staircase, out into the black night. She followed him to where a closed carriage was standing; he placed her within, and seated himself on the opposite seat, and not until they were driven rapidly away did Dot realize that she had done an extremely imprudent thing. Something struck terror to her heart.

"Stop the carriage," she panted, her eyes shining in the gloom with intense excitement. "I—I want to get out."

The man laughed.

Dot started to her feet with a sudden cry. The carriage was flying onward like the wind.

"Stop!" shouted the girl once more; but there was no answer, save the mocking laugh of the man on the seat opposite. A spirit of frenzy took possession of the girl. Tearing off her cloak she wrapped it tightly around her right arm, and with all her strength struck a blow upon the window glass, which shivered it into fragments. Help! *Murder!*" she shrieked wildly.

There was a gurgling sound as the man threw the cloak over her head—a few struggles—and she sank passively upon the seat, and the odor of chloroform filled the vehicle.

"Halt! in the name of the law!"

The words fell like thunderbolts upon the ear of the wretch in the carriage. He tossed the senseless form of the poor girl upon the seat, and springing to the broken window, shouted aloud to the driver:

"Drive on! Drive on—like the wind to the railroad station! Five hundred pounds if you get off safe!"

But strong hands seized the bridles of the horses, they were thrown upon their haunches, and a *posse* of police, headed by the tall, soldierly figure of Hal Dexter, appeared at the carriage door. Poor Dot was lifted out, and still senseless, was conveyed to the hotel, where Kittie and Mrs. Atherton received her, and strove to restore her to consciousness.

Hal Dexter, lounging outside the theater, in hopes of seeing Dot when she came forth, had fortunately overheard a portion of the diabolical plot which the ruffian had arranged with the driver of the carriage, and had determined to keep his eyes on the pair, which he had done, with the fortunate result already recorded.

When Dot came back to consciousness it was to find herself lying on a crimson couch, in a handsome room, and Kittie and

Mrs. Atherton bending over her. Memory struggled back to her at last. She recalled the startling occurrences which had just taken place, and lifting her eyes they fell upon the graceful figure of Hal Dexter, who had ventured into the room. In an instant she understood. The red blood rushed in a burning tide over neck, and brow, and cheek. She held out her hand, and the old sauciness struggled back.

"I suppose," she began, wearily, "that I ought to arise and shriek aloud, 'Oh, my pre-e-server!' as they do in the five-act, sensational dramas; but you'll have to take the will for the deed, Mr. Dexter, for, really, my head is so weak I cannot raise it; and—and—I thank you very much for all that you have done for me."

Her voice had grown very soft and tender. I am not sure but that there were tears in her eyes. Hal seated himself beside the couch, and taking the little hand, bent his head over it.

"Don't mention it, Miss Wylde," he returned; "as Toots would say, 'it's of no consequence,' and really I would sacrifice my life to save yours."

I think she read his secret. I know that she grew alternately white and red, and trembled violently. She turned her eyes away, and Hal Dexter forgot to relinquish her hand. Dot lay silent and thoughtful. She was thinking of her strange dream, and how it came true.

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy," she quoted to herself.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"CHOOSE BETWEEN US."

There was a suppressed murmur in the court-room as those unexpected words fell from Geraldine's lips. Sir John Sydney turned his blood-shot eyes upon her, and his face grew livid with rage and hatred.

"A wife may not testify against her husband, but I am not Lady Sydney, and never have been. I am the wife of Howard Ashleigh. I was married in Scotland two years ago."

There was a slight bustle in one corner of the court-room, and a young man, white to the very lips, sank into a seat, catching his breath meanwhile with terrible effort. But the in-

tense consternation and surprise pervading the entire audience were too genuine to admit of any outside interest, and all waited with suspended breath while Geraldine began and told her strange story from beginning to end ; even to the threat of Sir John Sydney to imprison her in an asylum for the insane. Geraldine's voice rang out clear and stern and defiant, and she concluded :

"Of my father, of Lionel Vernon," she said, "I have nothing to say. I have no friends. My brother is absent, and there is no one whose protection I can claim."

The young man in the secluded corner of the court-room arose, and made his way from the place. Adjoining the court-house was the great, old-fashioned village church, and the grave-yard, which for centuries had received the dead of the surrounding country. He went straight to the tomb of the Sydneys, and seated himself on a rustic seat near by. In the meantime the case was postponed for the present, until the proper and customary formalities could be observed ; and Sir John Sydney was marched off to the village jail, followed by an ugly crowd, which threatened to become a mob, and take justice into their own hands.

Just as Geraldine turned to leave the court-room she saw, hastening toward her, her brother.

"My poor sister !" he cried, folding her to his breast. "You need never again complain of being alone in the world. It has not been my fault that we were not together long ago."

After the first joy of the reunion was over, Geraldine, pale and faint, leaning on Lloyd's arm, went out into the open air, Lola accompanying them. They entered the old grave-yard, and began to pace up and down the grassy walks.

All of a sudden Geraldine came to an abrupt halt ; her face white as death, her dark eyes dilating with surprise, wonder ; her breath coming in gasps, her small hands outstretched, pointing to the great tomb of the Sydneys.

"Look, look !" she panted, wildly. "It is Howard Ashleigh ! Oh, my God, I thank thee !"

She tottered forward a few paces. The young man arose and drew near, pale and trembling.

"Howard !" she panted, "is it really true ?"

His arms were about her in an instant, his lips showered fond kisses upon her pale face.

"I was in the court-room," he cried ; "I have heard all your strange story. There is no need of explanation. Oh, Ger-

aldine, forgive me for my want of faith in you. I might have known from the first that you were forced into a marriage with that wretch. I ought to have believed that you loved me still. Forgive, forgive!"

Then a sudden pang of remorseful recollection struck his heart like a sword. Geraldine understood intuitively. Her arms loosened their hold about his neck; the tears of joy dried upon her cheeks; she stood before him, erect, and *trying* to be calm. But in her heart she felt that she had got her death-blow.

"Yes," she returned, with outward calm; "I understand. Where is your wife, Howard Ashley? Where is this woman whom you have chosen—this Catherine Dexter, who has stolen your heart, your name, from me? You must choose between us now—between the new love and the old. Where is she, Howard? You must take me to her."

Then Howard told Geraldine all about Kittie, and that the announcement of the marriage between them was fictitious—a part of the plot to carry out the ends of her father and Sir John Sydney.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

GOD'S LAW.

"Lola, you have heard all my miserable story; I ask you now to answer my question. I would not trouble you at this juncture, when you are so occupied with the punishment of this man who has made a desert of my sister's life, and who, I trust, will soon suffer as he deserves; but, darling, I must know soon—the suspense is killing me. Oh, Lola, I have loved you so long—ever since the night when I found you alone in the deserted cottage, at your dead mother's side. Lola, I feel certain that you love me—tell me—will you be my wife?"

Lola had been walking slowly up and down in a lonely, secluded place, a short distance outside the village where Lloyd had taken rooms for himself and Geraldine.

She turned her head and glanced into his face, and he saw for the first time how deathly pale she had grown. There was a strange, sad look in the depths of her lustrous eyes, and the hand in his own grew suddenly cold, and trembled like an aspen.

"Yes," she said, quietly; "I will tell you. Perhaps it is

best that it should be told out in the open air, under God's free heaven. It may ease a little the fearful pain of telling you, Lloyd, that although I love you with all my heart (surely there is no sin in my confessing it to you for the first and last time), I cannot be your wife!"

He gazed into her clear eyes like one who hears but does not comprehend.

"Not my wife!" he faltered, at last. "Lola, you are jesting. Great Heaven! I shall go mad if you torture me thus much longer!"

She drew her hand from his grasp.

"Lloyd," she said, softly, "do you think it possible for me to jest in a matter like this—so important to you? No; I speak the simple truth. I cannot marry you; for I do not believe that a divorced man has any right to marry again while the woman who was his wife is still living."

"Lola!"

"While the woman lives!" she said, slowly, "we are indeed parted, oh, my love! But, after this poor life is over, I shall be yours!"

He caught her to his heart.

"After this life!" he repeated, with passionate bitterness. "Do you expect to wait for death to unite us? Ah, no, Lola, God never intended such a horrible sacrifice! The law has made us free. Why should you not be my own wife, dear?"

"The law of man," returned the girl, softly, "not the law of God. Lloyd, have you forgotten? 'What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.'"

He laughed sardonically.

"You have my answer, Lloyd. God knows how it breaks my heart to say it, but I *must* say, farewell."

And she turned away.

With a muttered "God help me!" Lloyd Vernon rushed away in the opposite direction, a mad impulse in his heart, to take his life into his own hands, and end all his torture.

Once more alone, Lola paused, and glanced about her. Glancing downward, she shuddered, for right at her feet lay the deep dark ravine; the jagged rocks, like saw teeth; away, away beyond her eyesight below.

As she hesitated, out from behind a clump of shrubbery near, a slim, graceful figure in a black dress, crept like a snake, and a face peered out from the tangled vines behind her. That face, with its steely, glinting eyes, and hatred, ay, *murder*, in every

lineament, was the face of her mortal foe, Lady Venetia Chandos.

Nearer, nearer she crept to the edge of the rocky ravine yawning at her feet. Stealthily she dropped one hand upon Lola's shoulder.

"Die!" she hissed, stepping aside, involuntarily.

There was a wild shriek, followed by a rushing sound, as of a falling body, which caught the air with a dull *thud*, as it struck the horrible rocks below, and after that—all was still.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A RING TO WEAR.

"Dot, why do you not wear my ring?"

Dot glanced up with a start as Hal Dexter asked the question. She was still with the Dexters at the hotel.

"I—I do not understand you!" faltered Dot.

"I mean the ring that I sent you in the last bouquet that you received at the Coronet. I remember your thanking me for the gift, with as much gratitude as though it had been the Koohinoor; but somehow I never see you wear it. Tell me, Dot, do you despise the giver so greatly that you decline to wear his gift?"

Dot's face was crimson as she bent her head; but the brown eyes shone like diamonds under their long lashes.

"Halton Dexter," she said, with slow emphasis, "tell me the plain, honest truth; would you marry an actress? Many men would shrink from the idea. They would believe that the woman whom they loved would cling to the stage life, and if once debarred from following the chosen and beloved profession, would never be happy off the boards, but would always have a secret longing for the forbidden life on the stage. Now, for *my* part——"

She checked herself suddenly, and a burning blush overspread her face.

"For your part, what, darling?" queried the young man, eagerly. "Go on, Dot; I insist!"

"Well, I was going to say that for my part if ever—mind, I say *if* ever I should happen to learn to care for any man, and should become his wife, I would give up the stage, willingly, freely, and would be only too glad to settle down to a quiet, domestic life. Home, love, who could reasonably ask more?"

He drew her to his side.

"No one, dear," he answered, "and they shall be yours, and I will prove the truest, fondest husband that ever lived! I will have no other hope or ambition save you, and—home."

He might have gone on in that way for an indefinite time, that being the fashion of lovers in general; but right in the midst of his rhapsody, little matter-of-fact Dot inquired suddenly:

"Hal, who do you think was at the bottom of the attempt to carry me off? Do you know anything about the matter?"

His handsome face clouded.

"Yes," he answered. "I was about to tell you when I entered the room a short time since, but, somehow, it was forgotten. I have discovered, for the ruffian has made a full confession—by the way, he has been awarded a good long term in 'durance vile'—he admits that he was hired by Sir John Sydney some time ago to remove you from the way, that you might not be able to appear against him as a witness of his crimes. The man confesses that he has been trying to get you into his power for some time, but was not successful until that memorable night. Oh, Dot, how grateful I am that I was able to help you!"

She slipped her hand into his.

"God bless you!" she whispered.

And then, moved by a sudden impulse, she related to Hal her strange and romantic dream.

"As true as I live," she said, in conclusion, "it was your own face that I saw."

He caught her in his arms and would not let her go.

"Dottie, will you wear my ring now."

For answer, she drew forth a tiny gold chain which she wore about her neck, and showed him the diamond ring suspended from it, where, out of sight, she had always worn it—a talisman, she said.

He slipped it on her finger, with a tender kiss; and so the engagement was ratified.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A SHATTERED DREAM.

Kittie Dexter sat alone in her own chamber at the hotel. In her hand was a letter whose contents had driven all the color from her cheek, and had brought a wild, hunted look into her eyes. Poor Kittie!

The letter was from Howard, and in it he told her—striving to soften the blow as best he might, for his heart was full of pity for the girl—told her of the strange events which had so lately occurred; told her that his wife was still living, and that they were reunited; and Kittie understood, without any explanation, that he had never ceased to love Geraldine.

She went down stairs to find Hal, and there discovered that the strange tidings had already preceded her. Mrs. Atherton said nothing; but Hal met her in the door of their pretty parlor, and kissed her pale face without a word. But Kittie understood.

“Hal,” she said, after a time, “would it be convenient for you to leave London soon—at once? I—I want to go—to—Waltham!”

“This minute if you wish, Kittie,” he answered; “but do you think you are quite equal to the step? Do you think you can meet her—Mrs. Ashleigh—you know?”

Her face grew paler, and the look of suffering deepened in her eyes.

“Yes,” she answered, calmly. “I—I do not begrudge the poor girl her happiness, although it has cost me dear. And Dot can accompany us, if she will. You have spoken to Dot, have you, Hal?”

He nodded.

“She has promised to be my wife,” he answered. “And, Kittie, I think—if it would not be unpleasant to you—that we had better have the affair over at once. Would you mind it, Kittie?”

“Oh, no,” she returned, quickly. “I am anxious to see you happy. Let the wedding take place as soon as you can coax Dot to consent. Dear little girl!”

And warm-hearted Kittie, choking back her own sorrow, heroically set to work in her task of persuasion. For it re-

quired considerable arguing to bring Dot over to their side of the question ; but at last all difficulties were overcome, and one evening the Dexter party, with Dot Wylde, entered a certain church in a retired part of London. And when they emerged, not long after, there was no longer any Dot Wylde, but a demure-looking little person, who, henceforth, would answer to the name of Mrs. Halton Dexter.

The next day the party started for Waltham. Dot was full of joy at the prospect of seeing Lola once more ; yet there were grave misgivings in her heart. For she had received no letter, no tidings from her friend in many days ; and as Lola had hitherto been a prompt correspondent, Dot feared that she might be ill. But all fears, all unpleasant thoughts were dismissed now as the train flew onward. Dot remembered only that she was with the man she loved, her own husband.

She was sincerely grieved to observe Kittie's pallor, and the quiet manner, which proved more plainly than words could have done how the shaft had struck home, and the arrow of sorrow rankled in the girl's pure heart. But Kittie had crucified self. She had put away her own love, her own wishes, and thought only of the happiness of others. And, after all, this is the only true life to live. And believing this, Kittie unselfishly dedicated her future to the welfare of those about her.

The train sped onward, and at length steamed into Waltham. It was nearly sunset of a lovely day. The quaint old town lay bathed in the golden glory of the dying sunbeams ; every church-spire was tipped with gold, and the long yellow gleams rested upon the white tombs in the old grave-yard. They fell athwart the group which was just entering its opening gates, a solemn little procession with bowed heads.

"A funeral !" exclaimed Hal, solemnly. "I wonder whose it can be."

"None of our friends, I trust," returned Dot, with unusual gravity. "Oh, Hal !" and she paused in wild alarm, catching her husband's arm with both hands in sheer desperation, "what—what—if it should be Lola ?"

"Some one would have written or telegraphed to you, my darling," he answered, "be sure of that. Wait. There (oh, I wish Kitty were not here with us), there is Howard, and— and his wife, I believe. And—see, Dot, *who* is that beautiful lady ?"

But Dot did not hear a word. She had darted forward with

arms outstretched, panting, eager, breathless, to fling them about the lady of whom her husband had spoken.

"Lola! oh, Lola!" she panted, "I—I was afraid that you were dead! Lola, is it really you, or——"

Lola smiled sadly.

"One does not often attend one's own funeral," she returned; "at least not in the character of mourner. No, dear—where did you spring from anyway?—it is the funeral of Lady Venetia Chandos."

"Mercy! When did she die?"

Lola's face was very pale.

"She—she attempted to push *me* over Dead Man's Cliff. You know the place, Dot. But in her blind fury she made a misstep, and went over the side of the ravine, down to instant death. Oh," with a violent shudder, "it was horrible!" Then, after a pause of silence, Lola inquired: "When did you arrive, and who are your friends? I believe that you are keeping something from me. That's not like you, Dot Wylde."

"Not Dot *Wylde* any more," returned the little bride, with a blush, and laying a card in Lola's hand as she spoke.

Too astonished to utter a word, Lola glanced at the card, to find engraven thereon: "Mrs. Halton Dexter."

She caught Dot in her arms.

"Oh, Dot," she whispered, kissing her friend tenderly, "how glad I am! Halton Dexter is a great friend of Lloyd's—Mr. Vernon's."

"Yes," quoth Dot; "and—I think I can foresee another wedding looming up in the distance."

But Lola shook her head gravely, and turned away.

The solemn little group gathered about the great Chandos tomb, and soon "ashes to ashes, dust to dust," was said, and the door of the tomb closed forever upon the beautiful Lady Venetia, until that great day when the graves shall open, and all the dead shall come forth.

They turned away sadly and slowly, and left the fair body to return to its mother earth, and the spirit to the hands of the great Judge of all finite creatures.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A T L A S T.

"Kittie, what *can* I say to you, my poor wronged friend? Will you believe me when I tell you—God knows that it is true—that I never meant to wrong you in any way?"

Howard Ashleigh's face was very pale and grave as he uttered these words, his dark eyes upon Kittie Dexter's white face. She bowed her head.

"You are exonerated from any intentional wrong, Mr. Ashleigh," she returned. "I do not attempt to imply that my life is not saddened—that I have not received a fearful wound; but all wounds heal with time, you know, and I shall not die, because strength to bear will be given me. God bless you, my friend, and—and—Geraldine!"

Kittie laid her little hand in his. I know not how she controlled herself to meet Geraldine; but she did, and greeted her with kindness, and the day eventually came when the two were firm friends.

The day arrived for the trial of Sir John Sydney. There was such overwhelming evidence against him that no one believed that he would escape with less than capital punishment. On the morning of the eventful day Lionel Vernon called at the prison to see the baronet. He was admitted, and a long conference ensued. He came forth pale and agitated, and a rumor crept abroad that at the very last moment he had quarreled with his friend, the prisoner.

The trial progressed. Little new evidence was brought forward; but every one saw that the case was going dead against him from the first.

When Lola was giving her evidence over again, as required by the court, he seemed unable to control his anger, and as he listened again to the fearful testimony of his own child, he foamed at the mouth like a wild beast.

"It is a lie!" he hissed, infuriated at her words—"a false, wicked invention, and she knows it! Furthermore, she knows that I never married Stella Gilroy. Look in the record in St. Stephen's church, Greenfields, and if you find there is such an entry, I am willing to meet a felon's fate. *Where* is the record of a marriage between John Gordon and Stella Gilroy? I demand it."

Some one—a tall, clerical-looking old man—had reached the witness-stand, and was trying to make himself heard.

The judge demanded silence in the court, and turned his attention to the new witness.

After the usual formalities, the old man produced a folded paper, and proceeded to read aloud from it. It was a record of the marriage of one John Gordon to Stella Gilroy ; said ceremony having been performed by the Reverend Andrew Channing, and properly witnessed.

“This is my private copy of the record,” explained the old man, when he had concluded the reading of the document. “Some time ago the book containing the public record was stolen from the church, for some unlawful purpose, doubtless, by parties unknown.”

Sir John Sydney knew very well, that was quite evident, for he was tearing up and down the limited space where he was confined as far as the two grenadier-like policemen on either side would permit.

Suddenly he came to a halt. His red face grew redder, then paled to a dull, ashen hue ; his eyes stared wildly into space ; he pointed one shaking hand straight before him, while his dry lips parted.

“Great Heaven !” he groaned, “she is there ! Stella ! oh, Stella ! with the awful hole in her breast where the knife went in, and her great, staring, dark eyes fixed upon me ! and, listen ! she is speaking ! See her pale, blood-stained lips open !

“Murderer !” she says, “beware !”

There was a gurgling gasping in his throat ; his hands beat the empty air wildly ; then, with a muttered gasp, he fell forward upon his face, and when they lifted him up he was dead. Apoplexy had done its work, and the sinful soul was beyond the punishment of man. The last of the Sydneys had met a dreadful death.

They buried him two days afterward, and the great tomb of the Sydneys was sealed up, never to be opened again.

Sir John Sydney’s immense fortune reverted to Lola, as his child. She sold Sydney House at once, where Lloyd Vernon had been imprisoned by the baronet, that his presence might be prevented at the marriage of Sir John and Geraldine ; for the wicked man knew full well that Lloyd would never permit the cruel sacrifice to take place. The estate settled up, the preparations for the marriage of Lloyd and Lola were hastened, and

one fair morning in early spring-time they stood up in the old ivy-covered church at Waltham, and were made man and wife. After great darkness had come the light of perfect day.

When the steamship *Cambria* sailed for New Orleans, a week later, she bore among her passengers Lloyd Vernon and wife, Halton Dexter and wife, Howard Ashleigh and the wife to whom, after so much suffering and strange trials, he had been at last reunited. There was a certain dashing young officer on board the vessel, who became so alarmingly attentive to Kittie that—I believe the report had some truth in it—that next fall there will be another wedding.

“Let us hope that Kittie will be happy. She has “fought the good fight,” and has learned a rare lesson of self-conquest.

Howard and Geraldine will not remain long in America ; they will soon return to “merrie England,” where a new grave has lately been made in the Waltham grave-yard, in which Lionel Vernon, a sorrowing, repentant man, has been laid away out of sight. Old Zingra follows the fortunes of her beloved Lola, who would not part with her old friend—she is more friend than servant—for all the world.

And so we bid them all farewell—these actors in a life drama, whose effects are still felt in the lives of those concerned.

[THE END.]

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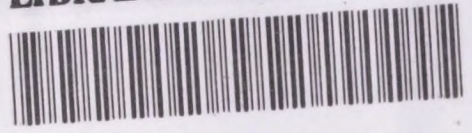
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